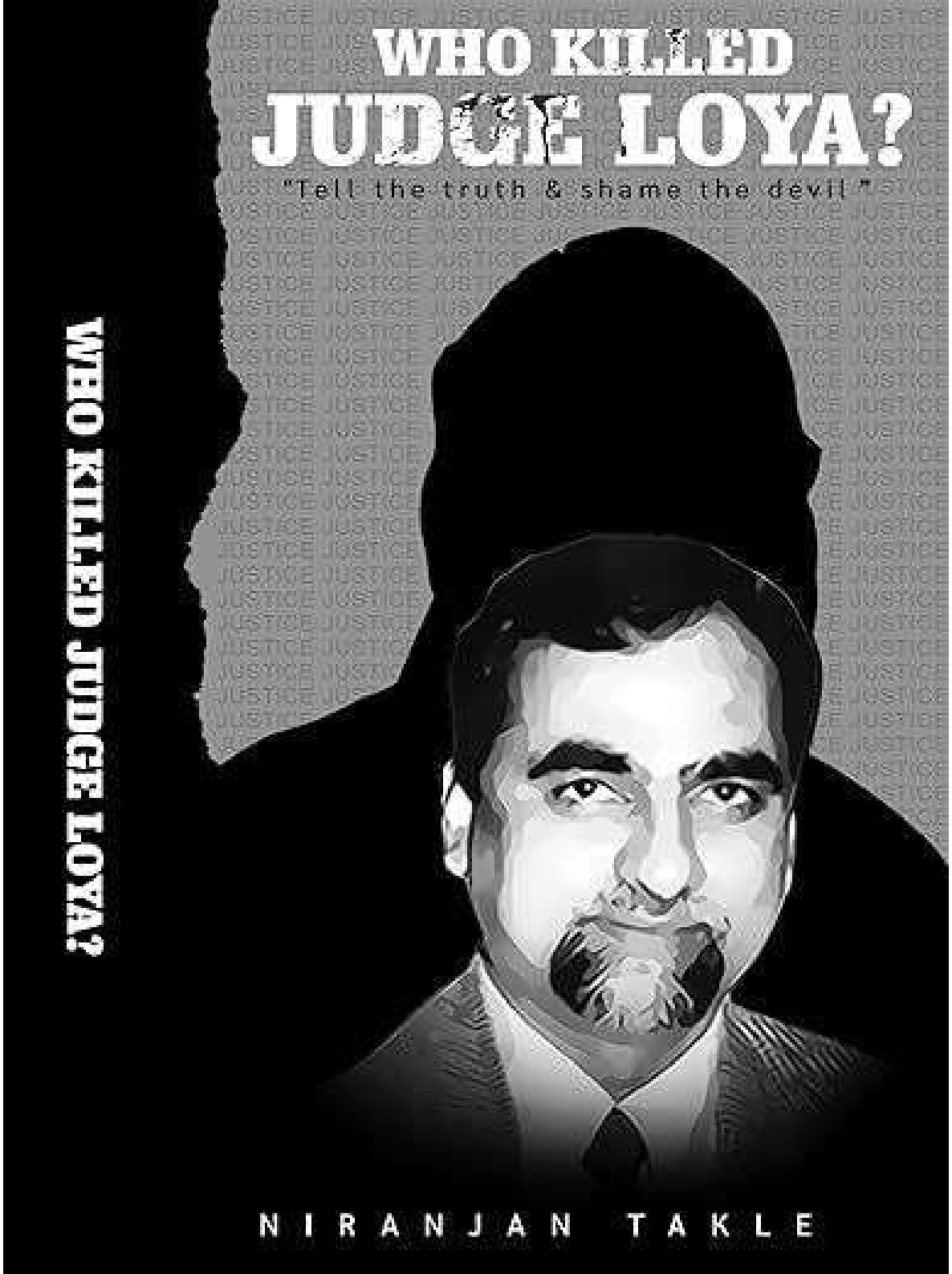
WHO KILLED
JUDGE LOYA?
"Tell the truth & shame the devil"
WHO KILLED JUDGE LOYA?
NIRANJAN TAKLE

Who Killed Judge Loya?

Niranjan Takle

I

WHO KILLED JUDGE LOYA?

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Dedicated to
Judge
Brijgopal Harkishan Loya
(1966-2014)

Contents

Acknowledgments

Prologue

1. Nupur Biyani 1

2. The Amputated Arm of the Law 21

3. The Fourth Estate 35

4. The Commencement 50

5. Dr. Biyani 63

6. Young Anuj 82

7. Harkishanji 106

8. Nagpur 129

9. Real and Demonstrative Evidence 159

10. Slumbering Watchdogs 178

11. The Caravan 195

12. 'A Family Breaks Its Silence...' 226

13. The Weeks After 241

14. The Evidence, Explained 268

15. The Judgement 286

Epilogue 304

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WRITING about tectonic events in Indian politics have hardly been a cause for personal concern. However, converting it into book form has certainly been a first, and I am therefore thankful to the several people who helped make Who Killed Judge Loya a reality.

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Last, but certainly not the least, a sincere thanks to my readers, responders, listeners, etc. throughout my time at CNN-IBN, THE WEEK and The Caravan—especially those who continue to resist the fascist turn our country has taken. May we stand unshaken amidst a crashing world.

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Prologue

ACCORDING to The Contempt of Court Act, 1971, Section 5: "A person shall not be guilty of contempt of court for publishing any fair comment on the merits of any case which has been heard and finally decided."

On 16 December 2021, a tired chuckle passed my worn lips as it feverishly mumbled the news of the Supreme Court of India's latest stumble into the infinite abyss.

N.V. Ramana, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, had, on this day, lamented about the death of investigative journalism in India.

"In the past, we have witnessed newspaper reports on scandals and misconduct creating waves, leading to serious consequences," he said. "[But] barring one or two, I don't recall any story of such magnitude in recent years. The concept of investigative journalism is unfortunately vanishing from the media canvas. It is true at least in the Indian context."

This parody of an elegy is not supported by the Supreme Court's own actions. Where were they when investigative journalism leaked the Panama Papers, Jay Amit Shah's financials, the fallout of CAA and NRC, Kashmir, Rafael, or the protests over farm laws?

Did they even take a suo moto cognizance of these incidents, or was the sand around their heads way too warm and comfortable?

Forgive me, I am already getting ahead of myself. Despite my forcible unemployment, the flame of investigative journalism in my belly remains alight, rising steadily to the tips of my tongue till I must snatch naked truths from ornate lies. Until recently, due to reasons that will make themselves clear, I had the privilege of being a broadcast journalist with media agencies like CNN-IBN, and a Special Correspondent for THE WEEK. From the kumbh mela to the onion mafia, from the cattle extortion trade to the plight

of Maharashtra's farmers, from a deconstruction of Savarkar's myths to a lament of the Malegaon blasts, I think I have invested my soul into exposing several untold realities and murky underbellies of India.

This is when throwaway comments from the Chief Justice begin to feel like personal attacks. Justice Ramana is perfectly free to take, for hearing, the few investigative reports that slipped through the current regime's surveying eyes. But he won't. His job, and the Supreme Court's job, is no longer to stand at the altar of justice.

It is to manage the contradictions of the ruling regime.

This concerns me greatly, for I think it a sign that we have approached a nadir in India's tangled judicial history. Corrupt governments have come and gone, but never have we reached a stage when it is normal for the Supreme Court to service the whims of a single political party (aside, perhaps, from the anomaly of the Emergency).

But this is where we are with the Bhartiya Janata Party, India's ruling regime. Today, if the BJP do not approve of a particular judge, they find a judge they like; legally or otherwise. If they wish to form a committee whose function is to scrub their backs, they appoint one themselves. If they wish to delay dates, intimidate witnesses, erase evidences and turn transparency into translucency... thy will be done.

Unfortunately, when the tentacles of power wrap themselves around the courts—the very dispensers of justice—that is the time to start composing swansongs.

Look, I am aware that some of my readers may consider these statements exaggerations, while others barefaced lies. That is your right. I am not here to recalibrate your beliefs, nor deride you for believing them. I am my own man recounting my own story, and would only gently remind you that I recount it not as an armchair critic, nor a middle-aged man cynical of modernity, but

as a weathered journalist who has frequently engaged with Indians from all walks of life, as well as the media that claims to speak for them. I pledge, as any news correspondent worth their salt must, to substantiate each of my claims through the pages of this tale, that is as extraordinary as it is terribly true.

In my twenty years of reporting on Indian politics, it became harder and harder to envisage how this country, which was once the hub of multiculturalism—of pioneering figures in peace and passivity—slowly became as tattered, polarized and eager for blood as it is today. Perhaps it stems from 2014, after the Indian National Congress lost the people's trust and the BJP rose to power.

My story, in fact, greatly concerns one of the pillars of the BJP.

As I write, Mr. Amit Shah is fifty-seven years old. He is currently India's Minister for Home Affairs, following a six-year spell as BJP's President. He is most likely, as the Prime Minister's right-hand man, the second most powerful politician in India.

On 20 November 2017, I posted an article for The Caravan that related to a trial in which he was one of the main accused. "A Family Breaks Its Silence: Shocking details emerge in death of judge presiding over Sohrabuddin trial". This was followed, a day later, by another piece: "Chief Justice Mohit Shah offered Rs 100 crore to my brother for a favourable judgment in the Sohrabuddin case: Late Judge Loya's sister".

These articles were a storm, grabbing national and international attention (it is probably the reason that you, dear reader, kept an eye out for this book.) The number of readers who searched these links and perused through these stories are in the millions. Civil society, activists, alternative media, political parties and even the Supreme Court took cognizance of the report. I recall how, while admitting two Interventions, the Supreme Court called it "an extremely serious issue", and ordered the

transfer of two other PILs from the High Courts to itself. An unprecedented move.

I won't delve into the nitty-gritties of the story right now. It is already available to the public domain, and will also be retold in this book. But what I will say is this: while the articles never openly accused anyone, the BJP trolls, among others, were swift to claim the blame upon themselves, and upon Amit Shah.

Shah was jailed in July 2010 over his alleged involvement in the deaths of Sohrabuddin Sheikh and his wife Kausarbi in 2005, not to mention the death of Sohrabuddin's associate Tulsiram Prajapati a year later. A CBI Special Court was appointed by the Supreme Court to carry out the Sohrabuddin trial. Amit Shah was the prime accused.

The presiding judge, at first, was J.T. Utpat. He was then transferred to Pune in June 2014. This was in violation of the 2012 Supreme Court order, stating that the Sohrabuddin trial should be conducted by the same officer. But, you know, thy will was done.

Utpat was replaced by Brijgopal Harkishan Loya.

Judge Loya died in mysterious circumstances in the early hours of 1 December 2014. A new judge, M.B. Gosavi, resumed the hearing on 15 December, and concluded it two days after.

When a trial that involves over a hundred witnesses, a chargesheet greater than 10,000 pages and hundreds of call data records concludes within 48 hours, then even toddlers can foresee the upcoming verdict. And, true enough, on 30 December 2014, Amit Shah was discharged, Judge Gosavi citing political motivations behind the allegations.

If official records are to be believed, Judge Loya passed away at 6:15 a.m. from coronary artery insufficiency. But my investigation uncovered facts which point to much more sinister conclusions. The obstacles I faced on my way to revealing the truth—as well as the truth itself—reflect politicians who have broken the judiciary to suit their whims, institutions that would

rather preserve the status quo and individuals who champion apathy over action. It is a substantiated, realistic recounting of the broken bodies which govern our country.

Above all else, it is a tragic tale of an esteemed judge who was silenced before he could speak, of a family coerced into compliance and of people who have lost complete faith in human beings, let alone the government. This book is their story as much as it is mine... if not more.

As investigative journalist, I tried to enforce change within the system. I researched with utmost precaution and, in my articles for The Caravan, laid the facts on the table. I trusted the people with the truth. Four PILs and two Interventions later, it went nowhere.

Five months after the story saw the light of day—on 19 April 2018, to be precise—I watched with dismay as the Supreme Court dismissed pleas seeking an independent probe into the sinister circumstances surrounding Loya's death. Let me be clear: this does not mean that any alleged conspirators were declared innocent. It means that the Court did not find it necessary to even begin a probe.

To call this a travesty of justice is to presume that justice was ever on the cards.

Herein lies my source of increased cynicism with the Supreme Court. India's justice system was never perfect, but judicial hypocrisy is a small symptom of a larger cancer that, arguably, began with the Sohrabuddin trial.

The profound frivolity with which that case was handled, the stench of bribery, conspiracy and murder surrounding it, and the ease with which the perpetrators have been allowed to roam free (not only on the streets, but in corridors of power) knows no bounds.

But unfortunately, like Icarus, I have paid the price of flying too close to the sun. I have held too harsh a mirror to those

who admire themselves in their addled minds. Since that unforgettable day in Pune, when I was first made aware of the story, I have mercilessly trodden along the path of justice, which became increasingly lonesome along the way. I lost much more than I gained.

I only pray that, were I offered the choice to change course, I would choose the same path again.

In the time between investigating this story in 2016 and the publishing of this book, I have been trolled, harassed, surveyed and intimidated. I have lost friends, family and colleagues whom I respected and loved. India has shown me, in no uncertain terms, what happens to those who try to shatter the illusion; who tell the truth and shame the devil. However, if the people hiding behind this charade of a court believe themselves to be safe, they should know I am never one to give up. After this setback, I have picked myself from the ground, dusted off the filth and tried again—this time not as journalist, but as storyteller.

This story is, in every sense of the phrase, a 'tell-all'. It shall chronologically cover the machinations that influenced the Sohrabuddin trial i.e., the death of Judge Loya, the acquittal of Amit Shah, my uncovering of the real story, its reporting and the subsequent fallout. It shall include stories that I saved for a rainy day.

To budding mass media graduates who hope to learn a thing or two about investigative journalism, this book will offer them a manual of sorts. It's a sobering reminder of the professional hazards involved in claiming oneself a true member of the Indian press. Investigative journalism is not about photoshoots, by-lines on newspapers and glossy business cards. It is, especially in India, a dangerous undertaking. It is about forming a backbone that the news industry will verily attempt to shatter. It is about accepting that the more important the story, the lesser its likelihood of publication. It is about critical thinking, meticulous planning, an

anticipation of treachery, unimaginable sacrifice and the nous to explore the trenches, battlefields and graveyards of modern Indian society with a steady hand, and a head held high. Most of all, it is about sticking to one's duty with the expectation of punishments, not of rewards.

I am here reminded of the beginning of an Allen Ginsberg poem: "be careful, you are not in Wonderland."

Throughout my narration of this story, I will also refrain from using the logic of the present government that divides and conquers. I shall stray away from phrases like 'bhakt-logic', 'tukde-tukde gang', 'libtards', 'urban naxals', etc., for it's important to make that effort. Anyone who has explored the cesspit that is social media will be acutely aware of how they only instigate, hurt, hate and divide. They are antithetical to a sober and truly compassionate discourse that should be bread and butter to any democracy.

Unlike our elected officials, I believe in unity. I believe that—Hindu or Muslim, Dalit or Brahmin, supremacist or secular, student or senior citizen, robber baron or impoverished farmer—all Indians stem from a common root: we all want this country to do well. We all want sturdier bridges, worker's rights, public servants whom we trust and leaders who inspire belief rather than fear.

Which is why, when it comes to this story, I request you to temporarily cast aside any clouds of ideology and political affiliations. Forget for a second your gender, caste, creed, party preference or agenda and read the facts for what they are. Because, as much as it may seem like it, this is not only a story about political parties. While it primarily concerns the externed, Tadipaar-turned-Home Minister, it is also the story of modern India. It will take you to families, politicians, students, media institutes, lawyers and hospitals all presiding within the locus of this country.

Above all, I implore every single reader to cast aside aspersions of fear. As some anecdotes in this story shall illustrate, the current regime is as cowardly as it portrays itself to be fearful. They take strength in unity, but if we show ourselves to also be united, they will disintegrate. Be reminded that the racists eat, sweat and shit the same, and they will succumb to the spectre of truth like a toppling house of cards.

I say this, because it is not hard to foresee that, upon release, well-oiled wheels of the propaganda machine will attempt to discredit this story. They may bribe and coerce the media to poke holes which do not exist, as The Indian Express pitifully attempted in 2017. They will, as the British did with Bengal, try to divide the country on grounds of nationalism, religion, caste or ideology. They will veer the discourse away from the facts of the matter, simply because the facts incriminate them.

None of this ought to change the state of play. Murder is murder, and the longer justice is delayed (or worse, denied) the more parasites shall leech from our sacred democracy, thinking that the judicial system exists at their beck and call.

I, for one, will not let that happen.

This book does not pretend to pander to the left, the right or the centre. It is for all of us who can call a spade a spade, who refuse to surrender in the face of blatant injustice. If you are an Indian, you are this book's target audience. I trust you shall read it in that spirit.

- Niranjan Takle

****

1. Nupur Biyani

THAT morn in June 2016 was a morn like most others—a happy sun to break the blue, white clouds drifting on clear skies, a clime all but ominous. Over the years, I have been drenched from top to toe far too often in Mumbai's unforgiving showers, to not view these light sprinkles of Pune as earth's blessings. Today, cool dewdrops dotted the window of my modest room at Hotel Royalty, running a race to the bottom of the pane. My eyes absent-mindedly followed them, as the rays of the rising sun peeked inside, inviting me outdoors. I had made every plan to receive it. It would not be long before my steel kada, my stocky arms, thick, rectangular spectacles, balding pate, and greyed beard would be walking across the famous Prabhat Road, peppered by Pune's droplets, before the sun melted them away in minutes.

Of course, I prepared for no sunlight stroll. Monsoon would soon be upon this city, but I would not be around to see it happen. Duty called. My time in Pune was to be brief—busy with

one source and a few interviews for THE WEEK magazine, before I headed back to office two days later in Fort, Mumbai, hardly a hundred paces from Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. Scheduling a stacked day is no novel concept to any journalist, but even the most methodical of planners are helpless before capricious variables.

This variable came to me as I sipped the last of my morning chai, in innocuous bursts of telephone rings.

The hotel receptionist spoke to me in impeccable Marathi. "Jayant Sonawane is here with a friend," said he. "He wants you to meet her."

My heart leapt. Jayant was a friend.

Our on-off correspondence began shortly after my coverage of the riotous streets of Dhule in October 2008. A bloodied day, a bloodied affair, from which Sonawane's acquaintance would, for me, remain the sole silver lining.

Jayant and I had, regrettably, lost touch over the months. That was to change in January 2016, after my piece on Vinayak Savarkar—popularly known, in most Hindutva circles, as 'Veer' Savarkar. That story earned me my fair share of enemies, since it dispelled the many myths some chose to consider truths. It had emphasized, among other things, his mercy petitions, his acquiescence with the British during colonial rule, his two-nation theory, alliance with the Muslim League and suspicious involvement in Mahatma Gandhi's murder. From such a story, the birth of adversaries was inevitable. But in Jayant, who found me on Facebook not much later, it had regained me my valuable friend. Jayant, I recall, had also written an excellent ground-report on the culture of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi—how it encouraged a safe space for all opinions to exist in tandem. Our respect was mutual.

But who was this girl? Why did she wish for an audience? Just yesterday, Jayant and I were chatting about Savarkar. Perhaps this girl was a fan of the story. Perhaps she wasn't, and had found holes to poke in the story. It mattered not. I told the receptionist that I would find them in the lobby, making a mental note of keeping the meeting brief.

Jayant was a friend, but the schedule was king.

*

"This is Nupur. My friend from Dhule."

We sat in the lobby of Hotel Royalty, amid ornate frames erected upon walls, portraits of Marathi rajas, their impressive moustaches and immortal glares, feeling much like royalty ourselves. Whoever chose this hotel—among all the hotels of Pune—for THE WEEK's employees to rest, clearly had an acute sense of culture.

Jayant Sonawane was tall, thin, and enviously handsome (I am pleased to report that he has, since that day, put on some weight), wearing a smile that would disarm a bullet that has left its pistol.

But the girl was still as stone. She wore a sky-blue top and a windcheater, was about five feet in height, and was as young as she was frail. In my mind, I tried to estimate her age. Twenty? Twenty-one? We shared a brief, uncertain glance.

"Sir," Sonawane was saying, "Nupur has heard conversations about your story on Savarkar. I also told her how you had covered the 2008 riots in Dhule, in the thick of the frenzied mob."

His eyes briefly flickered to his friend, before they moved back to me. "Nupur wants to talk to you about... a horrifying incident."

The lobby was rather empty, but Nupur seemed hyperaware of eavesdroppers. She looked around before she looked at me. Her voice, high-pitched yet softer than a whisper, was with a dash of desperation. "I want you to do a story," she said. "Will you do it? Will you write on what I am about to tell you?"

She does not trust me yet. She wants guarantees. This was understandable. In my lengthy career, Nupur was not the first source to barter before she babbled, and she would not be the last. Unfortunately, were I to pledge to run a story for every Punekar and Mumbaikar on their say-so, THE WEEK would span hundreds of pages, most of which would be supported with half-baked truths.

"Depends on what you tell me," I told, truthfully. "It depends on whether it is a story of national interest, and it depends on if I can substantiate it with evidence." My schedule yet niggled in the back of my mind.

Another nervous glance from Nupur in the general direction of the hotel's guests, the receptionist, the indifferent lobby. "It is about the murder of my uncle," said she.

Silence. I shared a nervous glance with my friend, hoping for nonverbal signals. I found none. Jayant the garrulous, the kind of guy who would interrupt a pandit in the middle of his mantra, merely stared at my face in uncharacteristic stillness, gauging my reaction. Nupur, however, had not yet torn down those thick veteran walls any reputable newshound ought to erect. In any case, THE WEEK was a national magazine, which selected stories that interested readers from all states.

"Nupur," I said, as gently as I could, "I have all the sympathy in the world for you and your family. But could you tell me why would India be interested to know of your uncle's death… or murder?"

To think of such a question, let alone ask it to a grief-stricken young adult, may be considered cold-hearted. I maintain that it is one of the side-effects of calling oneself a journalist. Of course, I shall also not conceal the fact that my despair upon hearing such stories had, by this point, tempered and hardened. It had toughened like a worn sword that has seen so much blood it knows little else.

Her eyes blinked furiously, but thankfully; I did not seem to have offended her. That did not mean I was prepared for what was to come. "My uncle was a CBI Special Court Judge, presiding over the fake-encounter case of Sohrabuddin Sheikh."

"Oh, my God," Jayant and I exclaimed, as young Nupur Biyani burst into tears.

*

Coffee. Sandwiches. Scheduled appointments tossed out the window.

I stood in a corner of Hotel Royalty's lobby, making multiple calls to cancel my appointments. On my apologies and postponements, I had but half an eye. The rest of my mind was occupied with Nupur Biyani, currently consoled by our mutual friend. Was there truth to her tale?

I remembered the name Nupur mentioned. Sohrabuddin Sheikh; once a headliner in mainstream media. Man could have been pawn to politicians, extortionist gone rogue, distant aid to crime lords Abdul Latif and Dawood Ibrahim, and accomplice to the murder of Gujarat's former Home Minister Haren Pandya… depending on whom one asked. But his name swam in my head as much as it sunk, for there was as much fact associated with his name as there was fake-news. I would have to research on him after my chat with Nupur. For now, there were too few needles, and too many haystacks.

The 2000s were filled with dark days for the state of Gujarat. There were the riots of 2002, the murder of Pandya in 2003 and twenty-two "extra-judicial" killings (I quote the Supreme Court) from 2003-06—of which Sohrabuddin, his wife and his associate were merely three.

Sohrabuddin was killed at the end of November, 2005, his wife Kausarbi drugged, raped, killed and burned approximately three days after. Sohrabuddin's associate Tulsiram Prajapati was killed in December 2006. At the time, the Deputy Inspector General of Gujarat Police claimed that the state's Anti-Terrorism Squad killed Sohrabuddin in Narol, Ahmedabad. An act of self-defence, he said—a fable that unravelled like yarn.

A few weeks after Sheikh's death, his brother wrote a letter to the Chief Justice of India. Its contents meant the Supreme Court ordered the Gujarat Police to conduct an internal investigation on the matter. The investigator, Inspector General Geetha Johri, in her interim report in September 2006, alleged Gujarat Home Minister Amit Shah's involvement.

One particular line had intrigued me: "It is reliably learnt that the Minister in [the] course of [the] conversation with the senior officers had admitted in a cavalier manner that Smt. Kausarbi had been killed as well."

The pieces of a puzzle that unearth giant conspiracies tend to be buried, often at the mercy of the conspirators. These ones, too, may have been forever relegated to the shadows had Prashant Dayal not pieced them together and broken the story in November 2006. That forced Gujarat's government, in 2007, to admit before the Supreme Court that Sohrabuddin and his wife were wrongfully killed; that the encounter was fake. That set the ball rolling. That caused the arrest of several police officers, the Supreme Court's transfer of the Sohrabuddin trial to a CBI Special Court in January 2010 and, in July 2010, the arrest of Amit Shah himself (although

he made bail three months later).

The trial that was transferred to the CBI Special Court—the trial that concerned Sohrabuddin's fake-encounter—was the very trial this young girl spoke of. I looked over at her after hanging up the last of my calls. For a twenty-something who was in tears over losing a father-figure, Nupur was now calm, composed and determined. Before I had made my awkward exit to cancel my appointments, I had told her, "Nupur, this is a very serious matter. Although I do not cover crime, I assure you that I will do this story."

Despite my veteran walls, I could not help trusting her.

*

"I am sharing this for the first time with someone outside of my family. None of them would like it if they knew I have spoken with you."

Why me, I wanted to ask, but stayed silent. Nupur answered my query regardless. "I have read, and even heard, people threatening and abusing you for A Lamb, Lionized."

The Savarkar article.

As I caught a glint of respect in Nupur's eyes, two and two came together. It turned out I had made more friends from the Savarkar story than I thought. On another day, I would have been game for another chat on Mr. Savarkar's character (or lack thereof), but today, Nupur's late uncle eclipsed matters.

"What was his name? Your uncle?" I asked, gently.

"Brijgopal Loya. He was my maternal uncle, my mama. I was staying with him in Mumbai for 2-3 months while he presided over the Sohrabuddin trial. At times, he shared with me the immense pressure he was under."

According to Nupur, Brijgopal Loya was Registrar of

Bombay High Court until June 2014, when he was abruptly transferred to the CBI Special Court to preside over the Sohrabuddin trial. A month ago, the Bhartiya Janata Party had emerged victorious in the General Elections. Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi was made Prime Minister of India, and Amit Shah was promoted to party President.

This, from a judicial standpoint, changed nothing. The Sohrabuddin trial was still underway. The charge-sheet filed by the CBI, still had Shah at the centre of all three fake-encounters (Sohrabuddin, Kausarbi and Prajapati), with charges of criminal conspiracy, kidnapping, wrongful confinement of kidnapped person, murder and causing disappearance of evidence.

The proportion, scale and gravity of this backstory was boggling my mind. I could fathom it completely only in my own time, with my own resources. For now, Nupur and Judge Loya took precedence.

"What exactly happened?" I pressed. "Why do you think his death was suspicious? What was the cause of death?"

Nupur looked overwhelmed. She took a step back. "Sir, first let me tell you all that I know."

Another round of coffee. I made a mental note to not get ahead of myself. Jayant Sonawane remained, all this while, entrenched in silence. He flashed his startling eyes at Nupur, and at times at me, but never with intent to interrupt. It was as if he were determined to let the kid speak for herself, while he sat content to stare inside his steaming cup and let me judge the truth of things.

It was slightly unnerving.

Jayant watched on as Nupur began chronologically describing the events. Judge Loya, according to her, was a very meticulous man.

"My mama's diary, pens, phone—everything had a

specific place in his bag," she said. He even left for his office as per schedule, something to which I could relate.

Except, on 29 November, 2014, Loya was told to join two colleagues on a sudden trip to Nagpur, Maharashtra. Judges Kulkarni and Modak had come to Loya's office, insisting on his company. Was this about a meet-and-greet, an expert review of legal briefs, a family emergency? Turns out, Judge Sapna Joshi's daughter was getting married in Nagpur.

No sudden trips to Nallasopara, forget Nagpur—at the other end of Maharashtra—were on Loya's agenda, so one could understand his averseness to agree. Yet it didn't matter. Before he was even asked, Kulkarni and Modak had magnanimously made train reservations for the three of them. All that was left was for Loya to call his wife, Sharmila, in Haji Ali, ask her to send his luggage to his office all the way to South Mumbai, and then board the Duronto Express.

"This surprised mami. On other occasions, mama would have told her all about the trip in advance," Nupur said. "Mami even asked him to come home before travelling, but he said they would head straight to the railway station." Sharmila, with little choice, had complied.

"Later, some of mama's friends in the judiciary told us they wouldn't have let him travel to Nagpur... had they known about this... journey."

Nupur's newfound resolve was already breaking. Tears returned to her eyes. Amid the stakes involved in this story, amid the prospect of putting my foot in the door of a sensation that could end my career and define several others, I needed reminding of the tender age of my primary source. If Jayant's mere silence sent shivers down my spine, imagine the plight of a twenty-something spilling state secrets to a man she did not know. It takes a brave

person to admit their fright—to lay them bare before a stranger, to plough past tears and anxieties in the relentless pursuit of truths that could confirm their worst fears.

Another coffee-break later, Nupur was back to normal.

"Mama attended the wedding the next day," she said. "He went to meet one of his friends, Judge Bora, at his home in the afternoon. Mama attended the wedding reception before returning to Ravi Bhavan."

This two-storied, off-white edifice in the midst of a lush front yard was the state government's home for ministers, government officials, civil servants, etc. located in the centre of the city—where Loya, owing to his seniority, was entitled to stay at its VVIP guest house, along with Judges Modak and Kulkarni.

"He called Sharmila mami at 11 p.m. and spoke to her for 45 minutes. He told her all these things I am telling you now," Nupur said.

That call was, I would find out much later, the last undisputed call Judge Loya was to ever make.

Many citizens, politicians and journalists have their theories on what transpired in those tragic hours that followed, those hours that may live in the annals of Indian infamy. I am certain Nupur Biyani was no exception, but to her credit, the young girl stuck, for now, to what she knew, and what she was told.

"My grandfather," she said, "mama's father, was at the time in Latur" (a city around five-hundred kilometres from Nagpur). "My maternal aunt stays there as well. Another maushi, Sarita, was also in Latur, since my cousin was hospitalized there."

Judge Loya was to return to Mumbai on 1 December, 2014.

"But at 5 a.m., Sarita maushi received a call from a certain

Judge Barde. He said mama had passed away at night due to cardiac arrest. He further informed that his post-mortem was already done."

Post-mortem already done? Nupur had not cast genuine aspersions, yet she did not need to. I already smelt a rat or two. The seeds of doubt that were sown began to take root, yet I listened in silence.

According to Nupur, Anuradha Biyani—her mother, her aai—also received a call approximately half-hour after, while she stayed in Dhule.

"Similar calls were received by aunts who stayed in Jalgaon and Jalna," she recounted. "Someone informed Sharmila mami in Mumbai, too."

Nupur's mother and Loya's five sisters prepared to leave for Nagpur, but there was another twist to the tale. By 6 a.m., they were told that Loya's body would, instead, be sent to their ancestral home in Gategaon, a modest little village not far from Latur.

Nupur paused. By this time, her hot tears were like awkward guests who had long overstayed their welcome. Between her bouts of silences so loud that they drowned the tongues of Jayant and mine, she furiously wiped aside her eyes and fought for composure. However, while the lobby was relatively empty, she was starting to attract attention. A lady from the reception approached us and asked Nupur if she needed help. She politely shooed her away, eager to continue.

It seemed to me that Nupur said her story with the same aim that a nauseated man sticks two fingers down his throat; best to get it over with, best to let the vomit out.

"The body... had come by an ambulance," she said. "Nobody accompanied him."

Questions were popping in my mind like stray monologues. What about Kulkarni? What about Modak? Who is this Barde? Indeed, if this was the first investigative story of my career, my impetuousness might have twice gotten the better of me. However, I chose not to tread the minefield of interrupting the stream of consciousness of a willing whistle-blower. I cannot emphasize how much, dear reader, is often lost to the winds in such impulsive cross-questions, such filthy digressions—all to satisfy the whims of the journalist.

"Aai noticed mama's spectacles," Nupur was saying. "They were… stuck under his neck. She saw an injury on the back of his head." She paused. "Mama's clothes were handed over in a polythene bag. It included his shirt… soaked with blood. The belt on his jeans was twisted and put in the opposite manner. The broken buckle was on the right side of the belt."

Nupur was relentless to her tears. There was, now, a steel to her sound.

"Aai was suspicious," she said. "She thought a second post-mortem should be conducted. But the people there told her not to complicate the issue." In her voice, I tasted a touch of rue. "Aai says that, if it was a cardiac arrest, there should be no reason for blood to spill. Blood doesn't come out even after the post-mortem. In addition, she says all clothes are removed before every post-mortem. The body is wrapped in a sheet of cloth and then kept in a body bag." (I would find out, later, that Nupur's mother was a reputable medical doctor at a government hospital.)

"This means," she said, voicing my thoughts as I thought them, "that the bloodstains on his clothes must be from injuries before his death, before the post-mortem. But the people refused to listen to aai. His antim sanskar, his last rites, were conducted then and there, at midnight. Nobody from the media was allowed, not even for the funeral. Sir," she ended, her voice grave, "our

suspicions about the cause of death began that very night."

As they should.

She fell silent. I attempted, delicately, to find answers for pending doubts.

"Didn't the two judges who went to Nagpur with Judge Loya accompany him to Gategaon?"

"No," she said flatly. "There was nobody with the body except for the driver. Those judges did not turn up for nearly two months! When they did, they expressed their condolences and their apologies. When Apurva, mama's daughter, asked them for a reason… they said they were afraid. We do not know what they feared," she said… although I had a good idea.

I asked Nupur for first names, or even initials, of Kulkarni and Modak. She did not know. What she could tell me was that this Kulkarni was, at that time, Registrar of Bombay High Court; Loya's previous position. She also said that her family was not handed copies of the post-mortem report, nor of the police panchanama—a kind of record of investigation reports. That furrowed my brow. Even if there was no foul play, protocol had at the very least, been drowned somewhere in the sea.

Nupur digressed from her chronological telling of events.

"I still remember… I was staying with mama for a few months while he presided over this case," she said. "He always said, 'beta, you don't know the kind of pressure your mama is facing. But I will be very fair, very honest. This case is going to decide my reputation and my future.'"

I tried to bring Nupur back to her timeline. I asked her how she knew that the cause of death was cardiac arrest.

"Aai told me. The two judges, Modak and Kulkarni, told her that mama suffered chest pain at 12:30 a.m. They immediately

took him by rickshaw to Dande Hospital, a private hospital. Upon reaching there, mama climbed the staircase himself, they said. He received primary medication there but needed to be taken to another hospital. He... passed away on the way, they said."

"This is all unbelievable," she continued. "Mama used to play table tennis two hours a day. He was a teetotaller. He was health conscious enough even to consult aai or baba for ordinaough or acidity!"

Once again, Jayant looked in my general direction for answers. I allowed myself a second of soul-searching. At the very least, I surmised, the range of emotions Nupur expressed suggested that she believed what she said was true. Yet it occurred to me that most of what she shared was, as of yet, hearsay. Her aai, Anuradha Biyani, who had spoken to the police, as well as the judges, would likely need to be my chief source.

Nupur was still speaking. Judge Loya, according to her, had told his five sisters that he was under pressure to take up the discharge petition filed by BJP President Amit Shah. Discharge petition in the middle of a trial? Mighty presumptuous. He was told that he would not have to worry about the media.

"On the day of ordering Amit Shah to be discharged," she said, "mama was told that some other big news will occupy news channels. Amit Shah's discharge would remain only in the ticker at the bottom of the TV screen. Exactly thirty days after mama's death, Amit Shah was discharged on 30 December, 2014."

I checked Google on my phone. True enough, on 30 December, 2014, nearly a month after Judge Loya was declared dead, his replacement judge M.B. Gosavi had discharged Amit Shah from the Sohrabuddin trial. On that same day, Team India's captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni hung up his boots in test cricket. The retirement was announced in the middle of a test match and in

the middle of a test series; not by Dhoni, but by the General Secretary of Gujarat Cricket Association. Dhoni still had to lead Team India in a dead rubber against Australia, but his captaincy was awkwardly handed to Virat Kohli.

No prizes for guessing what, that night, would make national news.

Many men and women of this country will concur to the notion that no Indian is truly Indian until they have watched a game of cricket. This sport, that once emerged from colonial roots, is today our national pride, our national heartbeat (I, myself, was both fanatic and district-level player in my youth). To watch its turn into an ugly industry, a cash-churner that acts as pawns in the manipulation of the general Indian consciousness, both shocked and utterly disgusted me to the core.

I was wont to take this story seriously—how could I not?—but perhaps this revelation, which itself hinted at the sheer scale of the conspiracy, ought to have goaded me into take it personally. I regret to inform you that that personal trigger would, instead, come much later.

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A non-smoking, non-drinking fitness freak (with no cardiac history in the family) dies of a cardiac arrest at the age of forty-seven. Bloodstains, broken buckles. Signs of head trauma. A post-mortem done in the death of night, a panchanama never supplied. A replacement judge who conducts the trial for two days, before reserving his order for more than a dozen. A captain who retires in the middle of a test tour. And the aspersions were not yet over.

Nupur was speaking about Modak and Kulkarni's visit, two months after Judge Loya's death.

"I heard that a very reputed and well-equipped hospital like Wockhardt is closer to Ravi Bhavan than the lesser-known

Dande Hospital," she said. "Why didn't the judges take mama there? When Apurva asked them for answers, they kept apologizing. They kept repeating that they were frightened."

The mention of Ravi Bhavan, in my mind, sowed another seed of doubt. If Nupur was to be believed, then Mr. Loya spoke to his wife Sharmila between 11 p.m. to 11:45 p.m. Modak and Kulkarni claimed that the judge suffered chest pain at 12:30 a.m. at Ravi Bhavan, after which he was rushed to Dande by rickshaw. How was this possible? I had travelled to Nagpur several times since Maharashtra assembly's winter sessions were held there. I knew for a fact that there was no rickshaw stand within two kilometres of the Bhavan, nor was it easy to hail one even during the day (believe me, I have tried). It could be that Modak and Kulkarni were incredibly lucky and found a rickshaw outside Ravi Bhavan a half-hour after midnight.

But why must one need luck? Ravi Bhavan had staff. It probably even had an ambulance!

I chose not to turn my suspicions into allegations (not yet anyway). However, I did ask her if her family had copies of a few records; if not of the post-mortem nor panchanama, then at least the ECG report or the primary medication received at Dande. Nupur's response was anything but reassuring, a fact she herself seemed conscious of.

"Sir," she said, "no documents were given to us. You will need to investigate to find answers to all these questions. But will you do it?" she repeated, ending as she had begun. "Will you do this story?"

Will I do this story? I had already promised Nupur that I would, but I had no notion of what I could write, what I could not. I needed something more; anything. I asked her if Sharmila Loya, Apurva, Anuradha or anyone would speak on the record.

Nupur, once again, was blunt.

"I am not sure anybody from our family would speak. They are all extremely scared for the future of mama's children, Anuj and Apurva. Anuj once wanted to be an engineer. He now changed his entire plans, and wants to be a lawyer. He doesn't speak much. He has lost interest... in everything."

I cannot lie—at that point, hope escaped me. No evidence, no whistle-blowers... probably no story. Perhaps Nupur sensed my pessimism.

"I am ready to speak on record," she said earnestly. "I will say everything even if aai doesn't allow me. I don't want more Anujs and Apurvas to see such a day. We must fight for the judicial freedom that gets endangered by such deaths!"

In my many years as citizen of this country, I have met smirking worms who style themselves as politicians. I have tolerated intellectuals who prefer apathy to activism. I have criticized those who criticize on couches. But here was a girl who, on the cusp of her professional career, was willing to stand up to the big guns of the people in power. She suspected that they had killed Judge Loya to reverse a verdict, yet chose to throw herself, after her mama, into the firing line, into the pit of flames, risking disrespect and death.

She would have to excuse my own tears.

"Nupur, I admire your courage," I said, the understatement of the century. "But why are you taking this risk?"

Nupur Biyani's lips flickered with a hint of a smile, but in her eyes there was only sadness.

"Sir," she innocently said. "I know karate. I am not afraid."

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I had considered all the elements. I considered the absence

of evidence. I considered the hearsay nature of her account. But I also considered that, if this were true, it would throw a huge spotlight on the webs of conspiracy that tightly bound politics, judiciary and even sport. I also considered young Nupur's resolve, her trust in the principles I myself swore to uphold. I considered my promise to her.

Nupur pressed, once again, on my capacity to cover this story. I wiped my tears and showed her my hand.

"We at THE WEEK follow a procedure," I said, steadily. "Once every four months, we have an investigation team meeting. The next one will be in July. That is when we suggest story ideas, when editors and owners question us about the angles, the evidences, the legal issues."

In my mind, I grimaced. I already had a mental note of the colleagues who would try to bury this story to save their skins. THE WEEK magazine was more liberal than most, known for its leftist inclinations, yet in the present Indian media industry, no Indian magazine could be too leftist before it was accused of being senile.

"Nupur," I said bluntly, for I saw no other choice, "I will need your family to come on record. In addition, I will try to convince my editors. The investigation in Nagpur will take a lot of time—they will not exactly be eager to share medical reports. Patience is of the essence. For now, all this will have to wait until the story idea is approved next month," I finished.

It was not the answer Nupur was looking for. She looked at Jayant.

"Why will they not agree?" she said. "If they could dare to publish his story on Savarkar, they will publish this as well!"

I remembered my years of youth when insistence demanded instant action. That insistence remained intact, yet a weathered sword was a weathered sword. If ever Nupur was a fly

on the wall of most newsrooms in India, I thought, perhaps she would know how a media house operates in an autocratic regime whose bread and butter was propaganda. But she did not, and it was up to me to temper her expectations.

"Nupur," I said, "A Lamb, Lionized was published because Savarkar is not himself in power. The ruling ideology follows his divisive ideas, but they do not accept him in totality. Your story is different. It does not accuse anybody, nor make any allegations, but people will point fingers at certain politicians. You need to know that the consequent political vendetta will be ruthless. Even the media fears a fascist, for a fascist never forgets their revenge."

Nupur remained downcast.

"In the beginning, we had hopes that a journalist would write about this. Even aai had written a piece on mama's first death anniversary, which included her own suspicions on the circumstances. It wasn't published." She looked up at me. "I told her that I will be meeting you after Jayant spoke of you. All our hopes are on you," she ended.

Our chat had lasted three hours. It was time for Nupur to leave. We exchanged numbers and decided to communicate over WhatsApp voice calls and chats. Jayant spoke for the first time in hours. "Let us take a picture together," he said. "I am sure we shall all cherish it forever."

Typical Jayant, I thought. My on-again-off-again friend had a habit of commemorating each event, episode or cup of chai with a photograph. On some days, I found it bothersome, yet on that day I am grateful he did. For, as Jayant Sonawane took cheery selfies on his cell, I saw, for the first time, the thin eyes of Nupur Biyani—once leaden, wise and weary from seeing and assimilating things beyond her tender age—finally sparkle with the life of a twenty-year-old,

and I saw her lips curl into a cathartic smile.

It warms my heart to convey that, a year and a half late when the story of her mama eventually made national news, Mr Nupur Biyani was in Australia, where she lived as wedded wife t a bright engineer of her choice. Her courage was as admirable as was necessary. Without her initiative, the truth of the events woul verily have been lost to the tangled knots of history. Thankfull Nupur's legendary karate skills never needed to be put to test. Du to her distance, she faced no threats and was victim to n emotional torture. However, much to my personal an professional regret, I cannot say the same for the rest of her family

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2 The Amputated Arm of the Law

SOMEWHERE toward the end of 2004, the cronies of a riminal with a clean-cut moustache and thin, sinister eyes spread heir slimy tentacles across the districts of Nathdwara, ajasmand, Sukher and Udaipur, ravenous for their slice in ajasthan's extortion trade. This man with his Marathi-looking oustache was in fact born in Jharnia, a modest little village in Madhya Pradesh. Yet, from such lowly origins,' Sohrabuddin Sheikh had risen to repugnant heights—from simpleton to ruffian, rom Latif's driver to self-made don.

Sohrabuddin had his eye on the marble trade. In October nd November 2004, he even called the owners of R.K. Marbles nd Sangam Textiles, extending latent threats. For an extortionist his was business as usual—however, in this case, there arose two problems. The first was that notable gang lord Hamid Lala was already closely associated to these traders. The second, more pertinently, was that these traders were extremely influential, so

much so that Sohrabuddin's associate Mustaque Ahamad, who offered, steered clear of the scheme.

The first problem was solved in the most predictable of ways. On the last day of 2004, Lala would be killed with the involvement of four men, including Sohrabuddin and Tulsiram Prajapati. The second, however, would be his undoing.

The CBI's supplementary charge-sheet claimed that, after Lala's murder, the owner of R.K. Marbles approached Gulab Chand Kataria, Home Minister of Rajasthan. Ten crores were put on the table—the price for Sohrabuddin's head—although the reporter who broke the story, Prashant Dayal, maintains it was merely two. Point being, Mr. Kataria, who wanted to keep the killing distant from his state, depended on his party-pal in Gujarat to get the job done, Mr. Amit Shah.

Here we fall upon a slight contradiction. The CBI charge-sheet of 2010 says that Sohrabuddin was henchman to Mr. Abhay Chudasama, head of Ahmedabad's crime branch. "On Chudasama's instructions," the charge-sheet elaborates, "Sohrabuddin issued threats to businessmen and demanded money. Harried traders would rush to the police with their complaints. Chudasama would then demand huge sums of money in the name of extending police help and Sohrabuddin got his share too." A wily scheme.

But Chudasama, in turn, was at the beck and call of his Home Minister Amit Shah.

If Sohrabuddin, Chudasama and Shah were on the same team—so to speak—then how would Shah profit from Sohrabuddin's death?

Reasons remain unclear (although, it must be stressed, evidence is not). The apple may have fallen too far from the tree. Sohrabuddin may have gone rogue, blackmailing someone on

Shah's whitelist. Shah may simply have agreed to do a favour for the Home Minister mate at Rajasthan, viewing Sheikh as a pawn. Alternatively, Sohrabuddin may simply have known too much.

I don't like to speculate on such matters, since I do not claim exclusivity of knowledge over the immediate circumstances preceding and following Mr. Sohrabuddin's murder. All that I mention has already been validated, substantiated, and reported for over a decade. At times of vagaries I, like all of us citizens, would ordinarily trust the answers offered from the then impenetrable fortress of Truth, Transparency and Justice i.e. the Supreme Court of India... yet these are no ordinary times.

These are times, as a 16th century playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon would say, when fair is foul and foul is fair.

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In the early hours of 23 November, 2005, Sohrabuddin Sheikh, Kausarbi and Tulsiram Prajapati were travelling in a luxury bus near Sangli in Maharashtra. After celebrating Eid with friend in Hyderabad, they were now en route to Ahmedabad, not knowing Gujarat's ATS had other plans. The ATS halted the bus, aiming to extract Sohrabuddin. Kausarbi the wife, Kausarbi the pawn, who was never part of the equation, interjects.

"Mere Shohar ke bina nahi jaungi," she exclaims ("I shall not leave without my husband, Shohar"). So be it.

Prajapati was taken to an Udaipur prison in a separate car. He would die at the end of 2006, which was more than I could say about his mates. For Sohrabuddin and his wife made it near Ahmedabad... just not in the way they imagined.

Rajkumar Pandian, the ATS man who headed the operation, took them first to Valsad, then Bharuch, and eventually to Disha farmhouse near Ahmedabad. The wife was raped and, on 26 November, the husband was killed. The cock-and-bull fable

about Sohrabuddin planning to assassinate a top political figure; about him being killed in self-defence, about Narol and motorcycles and enthralling encounters would, in 2007, be admitted as false by Gujarat's own government.

On 29 November, 2005, three days after Sohrabudin's murder, the widowed Kausarbi was taken to the ATS office at Shahibaug, Ahmedabad, if human rights lawyer Mukul Sinha's Truth of Gujarat is to be believed. D.G. Vanzara, Deputy Inspector General of Gujarat Police, joined Pandian in trying to bribe her into silence. Kausarbi refused. She turned hysterical.

When carrot failed, stick followed. Kausarbi was drugged and killed in that very office, her corpse carried to Illol, her body burned in a pyre, her ashes and bones tossed in the holy Narmada.

Let this not for a second read as lament for Sohrabuddin Sheikh who was, at least, a hitman, and at best a career criminal. No extorting, murdering goon is a true citizen of the state, nor an acceptable member of democracy. However, it must go without saying (and yet here I am, compelled to say it) that Mr. Sohrabuddin ought to have been provided a lawyer, tried before courts and afforded due punishment after due process. In a state founded on the so-called will of the people, this was an absolute minimum requirement.

What worried me more was that Sohrabuddin was hastily swept under the rug like an ugly-looking dust bunny, by superintendents of police divisions and elected officials who then pretended their noses were clean all along. It was as if they thought the solution to offing goons was through a government turning into the greatest goon.

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After Dayal broke the Sohrabuddin story in November 2006, after Vanzara, Pandian and Dinesh Kumar were arrested in

April 2007, after the Supreme Court asked the CBI to take over Sohrabuddin's trial in January 2010, after Chudasama and Shah were arrested in 2010, after the Supreme Court transferred the trial to Maharashtra in 2012 to preserve its integrity (heh), after the Sohrabuddin and Prajapati cases were clubbed in April 2013, after the subsequent unfolding of the farce that officials term a trial—concluding with M.B. Gosavi's lily-livered verdict in 2014—after all of that; after one year and six months, Jayant Sonawane absent-mindedly bounced his long legs over my hotel bed, stretching to his satisfaction.

After Nupur Biyani had left the lobby, I had asked Jayant how he knew her.

"Let's go to your room first," he said briefly, and began walking to the lift. That was just as well. I needed time to sink into my mind the scale of the story on my hands. Besides, what also awaited upstairs was my kettle of chai, the universal drink of India.

"Sir," Jayant told me in the room, sipping tea, "Nupur was junior to me in our school in Dhule. We are good friends. I came to Pune for my studies, after which we lost contact for nearly a year."

I recalled the article Jayant had written on Delhi's ignominious Jawaharlal Nehru University incident, on false propaganda peddled against student leaders by the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)—notorious for its right-wing leanings, associations with the BJP as well as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). His article, although in Marathi, was once viral on social media.

Jayant was speaking. "Nupur's Facebook account was inactive for long," he said, "but a few months ago, I suddenly saw her online. She told me she was not active due to serious family problems."

I recounted that JNU article to him, the waves it had made. Jayant nodded.

"Nupur had read it, too. She thought I was a journalist!" he said, smiling his disarming smile. "That was how, one day, while chatting, she asked me if I could help her write an article about her mama. She also asked me to read more about the Sohrabuddin case. I realised that Judge Brijgopal Loya was her uncle. Reports did not mention any suspicions, but I realised something was wrong from the way she asked for help. I told her that I was no journalist... but I knew a journalist friend."

I was no journalist, he had said. Labels were a fickle, funny thing. The world labelled me a journalist due to my association with THE WEEK. That world would, at the time, label Sonawane a mere student of visual media in Pune. Yet labels were often more deceptive than descriptive. For when it mattered, Jayant was beyond the cushiony bounds of the armchair critic and on ground zero. He visited JNU's campus after Kanhaiya Kumar's arrest in February 2016, choosing to put observant eyes and presence of mind to practical use. It mattered not what the world thought, for in my eyes, these were deeds of a journalist.

I wondered if the communal riots in Dhule, that triggered after the blasts of Malegaon, played part in his political consciousness. Jayant was in class ten at the time, an impressionable age for such inclinations, yet too young for trauma (much like Nupur herself).

"I remember you reporting in front of the burning bus," he said. "The low-angle shot showed the heavy stone and brick-pelting."

I nodded, sombre. The riots, exacerbated by most of the district's police stationed at Malegaon for support, were the worst Dhule had ever seen. I still had haunting dreams of that day.

We spoke about the story at hand.

"After hearing her," Jayant said, "I now realize that it is an extremely dangerous, risky story. It will require time and tireless investigation. Do you hope to get it approved from your editors?"

My exhale was half a sigh. That was the million-dollar question. From the Mumbai bureau, I could count my allies on one hand with ease: the reporter Swagata Yadavar, the photographer Amey Mansabdar. We often discussed story plans at length; less as colleagues, more as mates. They were my twin pillars of the office... but regardless, none of them would be part of the Investigation Team meeting in Kochi.

When I thought of the bureau chief, Dnyanesh Jathar, it was with ambiguity. A nice man, but at times too nice for the trade. When I thought of the Investigation Team, my mouth ran dry and throat turned sour, recounting previous pitches that never left my notes. Would they help or hinder? I did not think anyone in the Investigation Team meeting would openly support my proposition, yet I could not curse my chickens before they had chance to hatch.

"50-50," I told Jayant frankly.

I also said that, since I did not cover crime or court (my primary beats were political scams and investigative journalism), it was likely that, if it were accepted, the Loya story would be assigned to a crime reporter.

Jayant was adamant.

"Nobody else should do it," he said. "Nobody else can do it with your commitment, courage, and presence of mind. Nupur and her family won't trust anyone else. I am sure only you can make them break their silence."

Jayant's faith moved mountains. It certainly moved me, although I did not show it at the time. In a trade where editors,

politicians, rival journalists, citizens, and sources found faults in each breath one took, I found it hard to properly accept the few bouquets, among the thousand brickbats, that happened on my path. At the same time, I was under no fantasies. There were many reporters like me, and I knew I was not indispensable to THE WEEK. I told my friend that I thought any true journalist would treat such a seismic story with rubber-gloved hands.

Jayant, at point of farewell, said, "I will stay in touch with Nupur and will try to talk to her mother, Anuradha Biyani. She knows me well."

I realised how tired I was when I was alone. Perhaps the enormity of the story was finally upon me. Perhaps my mind needed a reset after hearing its fill. Perhaps Jayant lolling around Hotel Royalty's bed had found in me a kindred spirit, and perhaps yawns were contagious after all. But I shrugged aside my sleepiness. My day's appointments were cancelled, but it was essential to pen down everything of note during Nupur's narration. It would help me while briefing Dnyanesh.

This was, I think, a two-hour process, since I began with vomiting the minutest of details the girl described, before rewriting it in chronological order. I fell asleep picturing the various ways I could propose this story idea, and the possible counter-questions from editors. After I awoke, mind possessed, I did not sleep the rest of the night. I read every single report I could find at my fingertips on Sohrabuddin, Kausarbi and Prajapati, and scribbled away.

Notes turned to questions, leaping like loose springs of a busted couch. I jotted down the names of all possible sources and agencies where I would find answers. Before long I had made my mind-map, a flow-chart of sorts, a self-system I had fine-tuned over the years. It helped keep things in order and tie loose ends.

Yet the questions did not stop. The mind-map kept growing. I was spiralling. I needed to narrow my focus. I put my pen down. I needed an expert.

The scribblings had started, fittingly, with the words 'brave girl.'

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Amid humid wind, I stood in the depths of a lost gully of Fort, Mumbai, while an old structure stared down at me, sandwiched between heritage buildings. I would never have guessed that reputed human rights lawyer, member of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, senior counsel for the Supreme Court and (most pertinently) Rubabuddin Sheikh's lawyer, Advocate Mihir Desai, would have his office here.

This advocate was lawyer to Rubabuddin, Sohrabuddin Sheikh's brother and the complainant in the trial. Lawyers hardly opened up to journalists, even in cases not as sensitive as this one, and especially to reporters they did not know. I was no crime reporter—our paths had never crossed—yet I had to try.

"Fourth floor," I thought to myself, counting the windows. Without Jatin sir, finding this place may have been an investigative tale of its own. Jatin Desai was a senior journalist, author and columnist who had worked for decades in Mumbai. He knew its nooks and crannies inside out, and had resources I could only dream of.

Yesterday, I had met him at the Mumbai Press Club near Azad Maidan, hoping he would share Mihir Desai's contact information. It was a tricky topic to breach. How could I ask such a senior journalist for the advocate's contact without mentioning Nupur, Sohrabuddin or Judge Loya?

Jatin sir did me one better. He wanted no lies, so he asked no questions. Instead, he fished out his phone.

"Mihir!" he said, looking at me. "One of my friends—a good journalist, Niranjan Takle—wants to meet you in person. Please give him an appointment when you have ample time."

They spoke for some time. Eventually, Jatin sir hung up his phone and turned to me.

"Mihir will meet you in his chamber tomorrow at five," he said. He gave me his address and contact number. I was bowled over and expressed my thanks.

"Niranjan," he simply said, "You have earned credibility with your work. I am always happy to help you."

Sometimes investigations can be easier than we think. All we need to do is ask.

*

It was an intimidating office. Gravitas hung over walls in certificates and medals. Hundreds of fat files and law books towered upon shelves, beside a desk wide enough for a family of six to dine. Behind the desk was a fancy looking black leather chair, upon which sat Advocate Mihir Desai, with a countenance as welcoming as it was searching.

Anyone with more than an eye on Indian politics may have come across Advocate Desai by face, voice or name. His achievements preceded him. As senior counsel to the Bombay High Court, he handled high-profile cases on mass murders, riots, custodial deaths and state excesses, not to mention the fake-encounter case of Sohrabuddin Sheikh. He was co-founder to the Indian People's Tribunal, the Human Rights Law Network and Combat Law, a magazine for whom contributors included Urvashi Butalia and Stan Swamy. In 2020, four years later, Advocate Desai would briefly be arrested in connection with 'unlawful assembly' (a fancy term for protesting), part of the rite-of-passage any person of backbone in India must undertake.

I handed my business card and introduced myself as an investigative journalist from THE WEEK. Advocate Desai received me in impeccable English. But his nonchalant smile, casual carbon-rimmed spectacles and homely salt-and-pepper hair would not put me off-guard. I knew this was no Nupur Biyani bursting to relate her side of the story. This man had reached the apex of his trade with the general give-and-take of gossips and tips. He was shrewd, learned and did not owe me a thing.

I sat, and without preamble, I began.

"I want to talk to you about Sohrabuddin and the murder of Judge Loya."

Advocate Desai's geniality vanished. A pause for one second too many betrayed ever-so slightly that he was stunned, which I suspect he would have otherwise chosen to conceal. Once more, I chose my profitable path of silence.

"Wait," he said tersely. "Let me call my junior colleagues."

He arose. He left. He walked behind me to his cabin's door and started speaking to someone else. I stared blankly at the blank chair and at books I would never read. Oddly enough, I did not feel fingers grow cold or churns inside my stomach. Advocate Desai's reaction had told me all I needed to know. Murder or no murder, here lurked a story waiting to be sniffed.

He returned with a lady lawyer and two young male lawyers. They shut the door. The advocate asked me to repeat what I said.

"I want to talk about Sohrabuddin and the murder of Judge Loya," I repeated.

Dark, silent and brief exchanges among the four. I caught a fleeting sense that they already had a hunch. Advocate Desai seemed to clarify my instincts, yet he had no hint of an expression himself.

"We always felt... suspicious about his death," he said, wording himself well. "But why do you think it was a murder?"

Not so fast.

"I shall certainly share why I think so," I said, guardedly. "But I want to know everything about the trial. The way it was conducted, before and after his death. Arguments, discussions, even whispers. I want to know it all, because I will then be able to see the larger picture. Then I shall narrate what I know. Trust me."

The ball is in your court, I thought, congratulating myself over the pun.

"Very well," said Advocate Desai. "We heard about Judge Loya's death on 1st December, 2014. We were told that he died of a heart attack. It was... unbelievable."

He briefly glanced at the other three.

"His staff also didn't believe it. We never even knew that he had gone to Nagpur. And why on earth was his body taken to Latur? It was really suspicious."

Advocate Desai told one of his junior lawyers, who shall remain anonymous, to narrate the nuts and bolts of the trial after Loya's death.

"On 15th December," he said in Hindi, "the new judge M.B. Gosavi admitted the discharge petition filed by Amit Shah's lawyer, which Judge Loya had previously denied. Judge Gosavi allowed the defence lawyer to argue for three days. The CBI—the prosecution agency—was allowed twenty minutes. We were not allowed."

I could barely contemplate the blatancy of bias, the twofold layers of ineptitude and corruption, before he continued, "Judge Gosavi reserved his order on the 17th. He discharged Amit Shah on the 30th."

Three days to reserve an order on a trial with hundreds of call data records, statements of hundreds of witnesses and a charge-sheet over ten-thousand pages. Not a single witness was verified, no evidence considered. And that was not all.

"There used to be goons and rowdy looking people around, staring at us menacingly," the junior lawyer added. "A few of them threatened to break the legs of one of the lawyers. When he complained to Gosavi, the judge smiled and asked to ignore them! It was extremely terrifying. I will never forget that."

I asked Advocate Desai to hand me a copy of the CBI charge-sheet and the discharge order. He agreed. The ball was now in my court. I told the advocate and his team what I knew. I mentioned the unaccompanied ambulance, the rushed post-mortem, the blood-soaked shirt. I did not mention Nupur.

I spoke for a time. An hour, perhaps. Advocate Desai and his colleagues were very attentive, only intermittently interrupting with doubts. After I was finished, he only had one question.

"What evidence do you have in hand?"

I handed him a copy of the January 2016 issue of THE WEEK, over which, in bold and white letters, read the magazine's cover story: A Lamb, Lionized.

"Trust me," I told him once more. "I dig very deep."

Advocate Mihir Desai's grin was almost boyish.

"Niranjan, all the best to you. Stay very safe, as you would be treading a really dangerous path. And count on me if you face any legal problem."

*

While I worked on my brief, I tried chatting with Nupur Biyani whenever I could. Somewhere down the line, I knew I would need irons in the fire other than the word-of-mouth

of Judge Loya's niece. Nupur understood. Her replies were often curt, but that was because her job in Mumbai did not permit her to chat much during office hours.

"But I am determined to bring this out," she had said. "I am trying to convince my mother. She writes in her personal diary every day. I have asked her to read everything from 30th November, 2014. It will cause her pain, but that will only strengthen her to speak out."

Her wisdom rarely ceased to astound me, and I was also in debt to her voluntary ingenuity.

I had aspersions, hearsay, and curious coincidences. I had my background over the Bermuda Triangle of events in Sohrabuddin Sheikh's trial. I had enough smoke to surmise there was fire. But as a journalist, aside from Nupur and the off-record musings of Advocate Desai's team, I had nothing.

No matter. Investigation Team meetings were to bounce ideas on walls and see what stuck, not furnish thousand-worded write ups ready to be green-lit. Which was why, when Dnyanesh Jathar told me to make time for the next Investigation Team meeting at THE WEEK's Kochi headquarters in July 2016, my worry was not whether the story would have legs. It was whether it would have enemies.

I looked at my file before I packed it in my bag. "The Mysterious Death of Judge Loya," it read. I felt a jolt of anxiety.

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3 The Fourth Estate

I stole a glance behind my desk to Dnyanesh Jathar's cabin, wondering what time to converse with him would be the best. The time needed to be true, for the bureau chief and I had a sinusoidal relationship. I found him kind, but often till the point of weak-willed. I also did not like how his kindness attracted journalists who were also RSS sympathizers; journalists with whom I had trifles with after A Lamb, Lionized.

Yet Dnyanesh, I reasoned, was also co-operative and encouraging. He tried, as much as he could, to carry the tradition of THE WEEK that held the government accountable (much more than other Indian news outlets). If Dnyanesh sensed that natural intensity to my story, or saw that meticulousness to my arguments, he might give my pitch the green light. I knew this, and had already expanded on permutations, plans and flow-charts before the talk. They now included family members that needed interviewing, documents to get hold of, ways and means to access said documents,

names of officials, legal and medical experts, and the like.

Before any Investigation Team meeting commenced, it was our bureau's procedure to discuss pitches with our bureau chief. For this, I was as excited as I was apprehensive, for I could never know which Dnyanesh would greet me. Would he earnestly support my story? Would he casually shoot it down? The Chief Bureau was too hard to read, too polite to argue with. There were days when I trusted him with my life, and days when I wouldn't trust him with a paperclip.

This mattered not. I knew the Judge Loya pitch was provocative enough to be aborted before it was born. I would need Dnyanesh on my side to prevent that surgery. He, along with crime reporter Anupam Dasgupta and myself, would be the only members from the Mumbai bureau in the Investigation Team. Dnyanesh's vote of confidence would ensure the stream of conversation smoothly flowed my way.

Perhaps such measures were too pragmatic, too pre-emptive, but they were necessary to keep afloat the brief. I also confess an emerging personal stake; the impromptu promise to Nupur had never left my mind. I had a duty to that girl—who so reminded me of my own daughter—to tell her the truth of what happened to her uncle, who, in her own words, was like her second father. To fulfil my promise, no half-hearted effort or meek acceptance of the brief's redaction would be enough. I would need to sway the variables my way… which included asking my bureau chief to be my ally.

I bit the bullet and headed to his cabin. Good mood or bad, protocol is protocol.

Dnyanesh Jathar greeted me with a pleasant smile. He was a tall, healthy man with an easy-going nature. While his thinning pate showed that the burdens of his position were taking their toll,

he was fair and had great poise, despite being in his forties. His clean-combed hair and smart moustache made him appear handsome and trustworthy in a somewhat militaristic way.

Experience, of course, had taught me not to trust anyone completely, yet on this occasion I had little choice. I told him that I had a story that would be massive if THE WEEK devoted time, patience, and diligent investigation; that it required complete confidentiality at each and every stage.

Dnyanesh peered at me through his square-rimmed spectacles. He asked me, in a soft voice, to close his cabin's door. His voice was always soft.

I began my brief before my brief, starting from my meeting with Nupur. I spoke of the sources, the discrepancies, the obstacles, the angles, all the while wondering what was on my bureau chief's mind. This would be my first hurdle, and I intended to pass with flying colours. Dnyanesh, to his credit, listened intently. From his expressions and nods, he sensed my sincerity for the story. I began to hope.

After I finished, he spoke. "Niranjan, do it."

I was relieved. Other hurdles would doubtless follow, but at least the first was behind me. Our discussion then turned more candid. Aside from Nupur and Advocate Desai's team, my brief would also be augmented by activists, doctors and a few journalists. I mentioned them to my bureau chief. Dnyanesh interrupted, softly.

"How do you plan to do it?" he asked, a funny expression on his face. "You must be aware that it can create huge controversy. Even serious legal issues. I know you won't mind facing legalities or controversies…"

I bit my tongue before it could bluster. I, for one, was grateful to never understand the mind of the journalist who

thought of the police before the story. Defamation suits and the hullabaloo that came with it were part and parcel of investigative journalism, not cause to avoid such investigations. I could not blame my boss for his reasonable speculations, but the sheer fact that his query was considered perfectly pragmatic under the circumstances, merely highlighted the extent of the perversion of the Indian media. The state should be accountable to the journalist, not the other way around.

Besides, I also knew my dear bureau chief's personal motives. Once more the two-faced nature of Dnyanesh Jathar was rearing its unpleasant head. Here he was, giving me all the confidence in the world—as the mother patting her son's back on his first day of kindergarten—while trying to pull the wool over my eyes by posing 'what if' questions. He wished, once more, to make my own mind up against pursing a story that would cause problems for THE WEEK. It might also have fooled me in the present, had I not known him better than a cobbler knew leather. History was about to repeat, this time as farce.

"I understand," I quickly replied, deciding not to give this argument any ground. "I will need to get key testimonies on video—not by sting, but a proper video interview. I will have to innovate to find corroborative evidence and testimonies. I am sure that I will be able to find all the medical reports, but I will need substantial time to invest. I am least bothered," I ended, pointedly, "about controversies or threats, but I will take every precaution to dodge all possibilities of defamation."

Dnyanesh did not push me further. Perhaps he knew I would not budge, or perhaps the journalist in him badly wanted such a story to see the light of day. We returned to discussing the brief and the impending meeting at Kochi. I reminded him of his confidentiality, for I had previously lost major stories through leaks.

I showed my hand at the end of the talk. Before I left his

cabin, I told him openly how I would need his support while pitching the story in Kochi.

"Of course, I will support," he said, to my satisfaction. "This could be the biggest story of the year! Just prepare for the cross-examination by editors that will definitely happen during the meeting."

I nodded. That's the easy part.

*

Swagata Yadavar covered health for THE WEEK. One of her stories was a recipient of Mumbai Press Club's Red Ink Award for Health Writing in 2014.

Yet, to restrict her expertise to healthcare alone would be to simplify her skills. She also read avidly across all genres and literatures, which perhaps informed her grounded, upright demeanour. In a sea of reporters drowning in mediocrity, she was one of few I wholly trusted. From Savarkar to the onion mafia, she helped track my progress and fine-tune my story ideas, particularly from a reader's perspective. She was also half my age, which helped me better understand the consciousness of her generation.

That day, Swagata, I and around ten others broke bread together, as it was customary for correspondents, photographers, and the rest of the office staff to do so. It was always at the office conference room. After lunch, when the others headed to their desks, I asked her to stay behind. From her look it became immediately apparent that she knew I wanted her advice.

I narrated my story. The words were, by that time, well-rehearsed in my head, but never did it begin to dull, for each time I saw its effect on my audience, it reminded me of its gravity. She was aghast.

"This is earth-shattering," said she. "I have all the praise in the world for that girl, but I am extremely worried for them as well."

Even though there was no one else in the room, I thought her voice had dropped to a whisper.

"Do not talk to anybody else about this, but surely do the story. The judge deserves justice."

From that point on, Swagata Yadavar would regularly follow-up with me to stay on top of the investigation, for which I was ever so grateful. Flow charts and mind-maps took one only so far, if the capacity to confide in a trusted friend was absent. Yet, when we headed back to our desks, the loaded irony of her last sentence would, till this day, struggle to escape me.

*

We had spent the previous night in cool, comfortable interiors of Riviera suites, thus insulating my colleagues and myself from Kochi's climate, which silently simmered outside. Kerala on a summer's day was always a dreaded affair, a fact Kochi's weather proudly approved of.

Sure enough, when next morning arrived, and we made our way to THE WEEK's headquarters at Panampilly Nagar in our Innovas, with it arrived a day when heat and humidity fought for supremacy, and a weather that reminded one of a wasteland. But Panampilly could be snowing sheep for all I cared, for my mind was preoccupied not with summer in the season of rain, but the bombshell I was to drop at the Investigation Team meeting.

While we were on the way, my thoughts were not only with Judge Loya and Nupur Biyani, but also with the unbridled enthusiasm of Amey Mansabdar, a staff photographer and close friend. The day before Dnyanesh, Anupam Dasgupta and I left for Kochi, I had shared the story with him (without mentioning names of politicians or cases) to discuss visual concepts and graphics plans. This was also part of our bureau's protocol. Often I found this a thorn in my side—an unnecessary string of red tape—for my

days of TV journalism at CNN-IBN had trained in me the art of visualizing a story before putting pen to paper. Yet, to question procedure on such prideful grounds would benefit not a single soul... and besides, I always had time for Amey's views.

True, Amey had a temperamental nature on account of his exuberance and youthful optimism. It was something I envied and pitied at the same time. But he and I had worked on several stories together, often till the point that nonverbal communication was common. During interviews, I could simply steal a glance with Amey, for him to understand that I wanted a picture of a moment. Such was the resourcefulness of those like Amey, who were honest and worked hard to a fault.

I told Amey enough about the story for him to surmise the stakes. The excitement in his voice was not even veiled.

"You cannot get creative in such stories," he said, "but capturing emotions while talking to the victim's family and getting every important picture is especially important. I will do it."

On our way to Panampilly Nagar, I was ruminating over my dialogue with him. This was, I think, the first time someone had greeted the news with exhilaration, not with terror and anxiety. Something in Amey's fervour gave me pause for thought. This was him in a nutshell, of course. He was as emotional as he was ever-reliant, ever-present; the Sancho Panza to my Don Quixote. However, while I was unable to separate myself from the tragedy of the tale, Amey spoke as if it were a Meghan Markle tabloid scoop. His reaction reminded me of the weight of the story, but also made me consider if the average Indian citizen would react the same way.

My ponderings were put to rest when the Innovas halted in front of the headquarters. When the snowy-white building approached—with 'THE WEEK' written on a loud, red banner—it

sent down my fingers a tingle that I had been familiar with for years. This was the tingle of audacious pitches and fantastical facts, of hot deliberations over tea and whisky, of a modest building inside which veterans of words collaborated for the common quest for truth.

As the years went by, that tingle had turned duller and duller, as romance fought a losing war with realism. It now seemed to me a place where controversy found wet waste bins, where brave briefs were being amended for those happy to toe the line. THE WEEK, after all, was a small cog of a large conglomerate, which had their own fixed agendas to preserve their capital gains.

Below the loud, red-and-white banner was written, in black and moderate letters, 'Malayala Manorama', as if to suggest that it was only inferior to the royal sanctity of the fourth estate... and not the other way around.

*

We sat, as usual, inside the head office of the headquarters.

It was a huge, fancy, teak-panelled conference room on the second floor of the building, with an exquisite wooden table, several chintz chairs, a large screen and projector. This meeting would be headed by T.R. Gopalkrishnan—Editor-in-Chief of THE WEEK—since the Managing Editors Philip and Riyad Mathew (who were also father and son), happened to be absent. That would be to my advantage. The fewer people to represent the Manorama Group, the better.

Editor-in-Chief T.R. Gopalkrishnan (or 'TRG', as we often called him) was a calm, composed man, genial in nature. He was in his late-60's at the time, making him the most senior person in that room. He wore funky shirts and had a happy-go-lucky personality, but crucially, was one of few editors in the room with expertise in field reporting (having extensively covered Bollywood in

Mumbai). That might make him sympathetic toward the investigative nature of my story.

You may note that I was already sizing up potential enemies. This was because I had time to do so. For this meeting began, as all meetings began, with a prayer. It was Manorama ritual for everyone to stand and pray in silence for a couple of minutes before the meeting began. Usually, Philip Mathew conducted this ritual, but since he was scheduled for surgery that day, TRG sir took the wheel.

Some closed their eyes, some joined hands, some feigned piety to impress superiors. I was an atheist, and thus focused on my surroundings rather than the heavens. I looked at TRG sir as he conducted the prayer. How he may react to my brief worried me, but not nearly as much as other senior editors, who jointly headed the Investigation Team meeting. Senior News Editors Stanley Thomas and Lukose Mathew were kind men, but like fields of ripe corn, swayed with the wind. Editor Jayaschandran was much the same.

I thought the greatest threats were to be Sachidananda Murthy and R. Prasannan, Delhi's Resident Editor and Chief Bureau respectively. Since they reported from the capital, they had excellent contacts among constituents, bureaucrats, and political parties. They would never let us forget it as well, tossing around big names and hushed-up conspiracies like tabloid gossip, which other team members lapped like hungry puppies.

Sachi sir and Prasannan sir were the hotshots of our lot, but their combined knowledge was immense enough to inflate their heads. They both had manufactured around them an aura of wisdom, with their age, thinning hair, dignified moustaches, condescending eyes and princely smug. To such stratospheres their egos often rose, that they seemed to me precisely the kinds of persons who would admire themselves in front of their morning mirrors.

Of course, I was still confident of pushing my idea through. After all, this was my sixth year at the magazine. I was a familiar face with clout of my own. I had covered several challenging stories in the past, some of which had received the Red Ink Award. I was Special Correspondent in the Mumbai bureau, and had been awarded two gold medals by THE WEEK. I had enough gravitas to be heard. Besides, I had my bureau chief, Dnyanesh Jathar, waiting in the wings. I had played my cards the best I could.

The Investigation Team meeting began.

Stanley Thomas took a review of the previous meeting. We revised story ideas completed during the last quarter. My stomach was turning the entire time. Then began the briefs. Rabi Banerjee from Kolkata was first on the list. I was second. Today, even the topic of Rabi's brief escapes me. Perhaps it was due to the events that eclipsed them.

When it was my turn, Stanley handed everyone in the room a copy of my brief; titled 'Mysterious Death of Judge Loya'. I used no projector, but only my paper and my voice. All that while, my eyes scarce left my words. They read patiently as I narrated all that I knew, all that I speculated, and what would come next.

I went on, perhaps, for thirty minutes. News editors kept interrupting to clarify my sources, my angles, but this was the time merely to answer doubts, not to poke holes. That would come later.

I was finished. I looked up from my notes. Lukose, Jayaschandran, Stanley and Dnyanesh Jathar all had their poise tilted toward Sachi and Prasannan. Like sheep, they waited for the shepherd to show them the path. Prasannan began.

"This is all hearsay," he said. "Do you have anything on record? You should have done so," he said, without waiting for an answer. "How can we approve a hearsay account? Do you realize the implication?"

Sachi sir nodded sagely besides.

These were perfectly rational questions, of course, but I had the hunch of sinister motives behind them. I stayed on topic.

"I have Rubabuddin's lawyer on record," I said. "I will get Judge Loya's sister, Anuradha Biyani, on record. I have planned ways to get my hands on the post-mortem and other medical reports. Every criminal ends up leaving their visiting card at the crime scene. I will diligently pursue that. Whatever it takes."

I eyed my bureau chief, my silver bullet. Dnyanesh Jathar was mute, as if unaware that an Investigation Team meeting was around him. He furiously scribbled something on his notepad. I must presume it was a jail cell, to symbolize his caged mind.

"And who else?" Lukose Mathew jumped in. "Who else will say, on record, apart from his sister, that this was a murder? And how can we link Amit Shah to this?"

I was careful not to name Amit Shah amidst all this, but he was the elephant in the room.

"If this one-page brief leads you to think that it was murder, then evidence will substantiate it," I said, confidently. "And I am not naming Amit Shah at all, even if he was discharged after Judge Gosavi heard the case for only three days. I will simply substantiate, with evidence, that Judge Loya's death needs an investigation."

But Sachi sir would not stop, continuing to lead the charge against the story.

"I am not convinced," he said, finally. "Gathering evidence in such a case will take years. How can the magazine allow anyone to work on just one story for such a long time?"

TRG chimed in.

"Well," he said, "with proper evidence, this would be a

massive story. And one cannot work on one story for such an unpredictably long time..." he said, looking at me, "...but, Niranjan, I say keep at it. Do it when you happen to be in Nagpur, Dhule or Latur while working on other stories. Keep us updated," he added firmly, before Sachi sir could say anything else.

The effect of TRG's words was evident from the faces of the others. T.R. Gopalkrishnan was an engineer by education, but he was a journalist by blood. He was experienced from culture to agriculture, knew reportage better than most husbands knew their wives, and was associated with THE WEEK since its founding in 1983. While my bureau chief chose the most curious of moments for his vow of silence, TRG sir stepped up and gave me the go-ahead, and to others the signal of 'do not discourage'.

I most savoured the silence of the duo from Delhi. They were men institutionalized, to whom the tiniest tiptoe beyond the industry's devilish box of norms was sacrilege. Their experience was their folly, tethering them to tunnel visions, safe bets and U-turns from the first sniff of controversy, redacting clause upon clause until conjunctions were all what remained. Unfortunately, the news industry chewed, churned and spat out such lifeless labour for breakfast.

As we left the building, I paused for a moment at the first floor and glanced at a huge board, erected by THE WEEK ever since I was an employee. It was a wall-of-fame which proudly displayed, from framed certificates to photoshoots, the several awards the magazine had won over the years. The first time I saw the board, I wondered whether the day would come when I saw my own smile beaming back at me.

Today, I wondered how many correspondents would never find their names near it, because their briefs were redacted by desk editors.

*

TRG sir had come to my rescue, but this was still half a victory. THE WEEK had permitted me to pursue the story, but I was only allowed to do so on my own time. This was not always the case. Even when, in 2015, I faced pushback for my Savarkar story, after that brief was green-lit I was allowed to devote all my time and energy into its research, which took me over four months.

Yet, I suppose their decision was fair. I only really had the word-of-mouth of Advocate Mihir Desai and Nupur Biyani, which was not enough for a story of this scale.

Immediately after the Investigation Team meeting ended, Nupur was the first person I texted. I told her that THE WEEK would carry the story if I substantiated it with evidence enough to raise questions. But my mind was already thinking ahead. It was currently on Anuradha Biyani, Nupur's mother, whom Jayant Sonawane had promised to speak to. I would need updates on how that conversation went.

From my Mumbai companions, I had returned to Riviera alone. Dnyanesh Jathar, I presume, had his own matters to discuss with the editors, while poor Anupam Dasgupta was like a sycophant to them. Which meant they would not return to the Riviera until it was late.

I happened to meet Swagata and Amey at the ground floor of the suite. They had also, on that day, reached Kochi for our southwest bureau meetings. The sun was setting, and Riviera had a beautiful garden, so we felt like a walk. We strolled along lush trees and shrubs and the cooling winds of the city, under a sky turning orange and violet. For a second, I almost forgot that we were in Kochi on business.

I told them everything that transpired at the meeting. Swagata was annoyed.

"Dnyanesh is always submissive to those seniors from Delhi," she complained. That was our common inference.

From my years at the magazine, I had a hunch that Prasannan and Sachi sir were asked to liaison with top politicians at the capital for Manorama Group's import and export permissions. After all, the conglomerate did not only own newspapers and magazines like Malayala Manorama, Vanitha or THE WEEK, but also MRF, 91.9 FM, Napotech Printing Inks, GMart, Funskool India, Devon Machines, etc.

You do not need me to tell you how running a story on Judge Loya's murder would retard rapports and contacts within the capital, not to mention the chances of ratifying permissions in the future. Once more, interests of politicians and capitalists were clouding the duties of the journalist.

It was because of small moments like the stroll across the Riviera gardens, that I was eternally grateful for my personal space with like-minded people like Amey and Swagata. Others were not as welcoming. It was especially hard to comprehend the antipathy of my senior editors, none of whom interacted with me during and after the meeting—as if I was some leper, as if daring to speak truth to power was a cardinal vice against Vitthal. To not question the status quo was to be apolitical, but to outlaw those who did was to be an airhead.

Later that night, I called Jayant Sonawane, and told him that I was allowed to pursue the Judge Loya story further. His excited chatter dominated the conversation for a while, as was his wont. After small talk had ended, I asked for updates.

"It is exceptionally crucial that Nupur's mother speaks to me in detail, and on record," I said.

Nupur's account was an excellent point of reference, but it was also about eighty percent hearsay, and would not be legally

tenable. Most of her revelations were second-hand from her mother, Anuradha.

Unfortunately, Jayant had fared no better than Nupur. Anuradha would simply not speak and was wary of her daughter who had chosen to speak. Jayant and I spoke some more on Anuradha, as it was imperative to get her entire account on record. We decided to discuss this in further detail upon my return to Pune.

An early morning flight to Mumbai awaited the next day, but I was busy formulating my plan; checking off names from my list to interview. Nupur Biyani would be the first. Then there were Judge Loya's five sisters; Anuradha and Sarita Mandhane among them. There was their father, Harkishan Loya. There was Loya's widowed wife Sharmila, as well as her two children Anuj and Apurva. Nupur had also mentioned Modak and Kulkarni, the two judges who bought Loya his free ticket to Nagpur. I was yet to find out their first names.

All of them, I surmised, would, or would not, add the pieces to this gigantic puzzle—a puzzle I would have to solve without the Indian government's knowledge.

But none of the pieces were as important to me as Anuradha Biyani. It was Anuradha who had received the call from Nagpur, who was present when her brother's body arrived by ambulance. She saw that none of the Nagpur judges came with the corpse, that her brother's spectacles were stuck under his neck, that there was an injury on the back of his head, that there was blood on his shirt and trousers, packed inside a polythene. She had demanded a second post-mortem, only to be shunned.

She would be key, if only she found her voice.

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4. The Commencement

THE start of any investigation incites most excitement.

Culprits and victims await discovery, story angles are created and fleshed, possibilities are at its most endless and limits soar beyond skies before they need to be brought to earth. My enquiries could finally commence, now that those twisted webs which stopped stories from exiting THE WEEK's offices were behind me. Yet the risk of rejection forever loomed in the cobwebbed shadows. If I snooped around days on end without something solid, editors would feast upon the bare bones of my story like vultures.

Today, I didn't care. It was the weekend, and I was finally home.

Nashik was a modest town in Maharashtra, but much more my sanctum sanctorum than the metropolitan mess of Mumbai. The town was loved for the grapes, the Godavari, the Sula vineyards, the bicentennial kumbh mela. It also acted as a convenient base of operations for my job, when I covered the

thirteen districts of North Maharashtra and Marathwada. India Security Press, Deolali Camp, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, North Maharashtra's Divisional Revenue Office, etc. were also areas in Nashik that I frequented for quotes.

But to end my praises at that would be a cruel, forensic appreciation only of Nashik's functions, and would discount the fact that this was my childhood town. I grew up in its cool climate, listening to legends of Rama, Sita and Ravana. This was my home as much as it was home to ideologues from Savarkar to Comrade Dange, or icons of fine arts like Shirwadkar (Kusumagraj), Shanta Jog, and Datta Bhat.

I could not help but love Nashik for its history, its weather, its misal pav and, above all, my family.

After I moved to Mumbai in 2010, I often met my daughter, for she studied at St. Xavier's Mumbai since 2013. Its campus was barely a kilometre from my office.

But I had not met my wife for nearly three weeks, and homesickness had snuck upon me quicker than the thrill of the hunt. While our daughter lived in a hostel at Mumbai Central and I lived in a rented room at Cotton Green, my wife stayed at Nashik alone.

Shortly after I reached home, she prepared dinner while I sat in silence, wondering how life would have been like had I not taken up THE WEEK's offer. One of my biggest sacrifices was moving to Mumbai, for I only visited my family twice a month, for around a day. I never knew what was new in their lives until weeks after the event.

Most of what she and I spoke over dinner was about catching up, and so it was today. After some small talk, my wife cut to the chase.

"How was your meeting?" she asked.

I had made no segues into work talk, but the meeting was

the only thing on my mind. It was as if she had read it like a book. I answered her question with a question of my own.

"How did you know that I had something to say about my meeting?"

She tore a chapatti.

"You always have things to talk about, but only your job. And I think you look impatient."

Awkward pause. I was a talker by habit, but she spoke much more with silence than with words.

It took me a moment to gather my bearings. Judge Loya, yes. I evaded the jibe that I might have deserved, and spoke of the story—its effect dulled since her request was so explicit.

"I am going to do a really big story," I began. "Probably my biggest yet." My voice tingled with excitement. "It will take time to do it. It is about the murder of a judge…"

"Please do not tell me anything more," she cut my sentence short. "I won't be able to stop you from doing it, and I do not want to be unnecessarily tensed."

More silence. Time and time again, in my quest to tell the truth and shame the devil, I was guilty of overlooking the closest casualties of my crusade. My wife scarce expressed whenever she worried for my safety, even when I knew how often it was. She never stopped me from fighting my battles.

After A Lamb, Lionized, close relatives condemned our entire family (for my audacity to report facts as a journalist). I cared not one bit what parrots of propaganda thought, but I cared when it affected my wife and daughter, who bore the brunt of my acts with supreme grace and silence.

Judge Loya, I then decided, would remain a stranger to my family until he was on THE WEEK's cover page for India to see.

I changed the subject. We went back to our meals.

*

To explain how the first source for the 'Mysterious Death of Judge Loya' was formally recorded at the control room of the Maratha Kranti Morcha, I must begin from Monday morning at the office, when the news cycle was dominated by the Kopardi rape case.

On 13 July, a 15-year-old girl in Kopardi, Ahmednagar had been gang-raped by three men. They also broke her limbs, pulled out her hair and murdered her. The culprits were caught within the week, there was no sight nor sound of a charge-sheet, and the outraged Maratha community would accept nothing less than capital punishment.

That morning, Dnyanesh Jathar entered office an hour after I did. "Meet me in my cabin after ten minutes," was his welcome to me.

Dnyanesh required my sources for the Kopardi story, but this was also the first conversation we would have after my Judge Loya pitch. After the Investigation Team meeting in Kochi, Dnyanesh and I had only exchanged brief words, but the bureau chief had intimated that there would be detailed discussions in Mumbai.

I sat at my desk, eyeing my action plan on papers and pen. I would have liked to run it past Swagata and Amey, but they were both out on morning assignments.

A laundry list.

Oral testimonies and CCTV footages were necessary, but they were only circumstantial evidences. Original documents were Real and Demonstrative evidences, and carried more weight in court… should it come to that.

Post-mortem. Forensic report. Inquest Panchanama. Medico-legal case. That is what I need.

"Every criminal ends up leaving their visiting card," I had

told Prasannan sir with my chest out. I should have been more modest than mouthy. It wasn't as if they awaited me in neat, laminated sheets.

Dnyanesh Jathar fed me his military smile in his office, to which I replied with a cordial one. I waited for him to speak.

"It was good that TRG sir supported and approved your idea," Dnyanesh began. "I didn't expect it to go through, especially after the initial discussion. But, now, how do you plan to go ahead?"

I was surprised Dnyanesh remembered the discussion in which he appeared to be deaf.

"Somehow, everything happened exactly as I expected," I said, smiling. "I am sure Riyad sir would also have supported it, had he been present."

Whether the pointed nature of these comments registered inside the thick skull, I could never say for sure, for Dnyanesh had as much a poker face as it was charming.

"Anyway," I added, "I have prepared my own ways to investigate the story."

I told him about the post-mortem report and similar documents, the Real and Demonstrative evidences.

"I am confident of getting the evidence to substantiate the story, but I want this to stay confidential. Just between the two of us."

Dnyanesh chuckled. He appeared genuinely amused.

"I told all the editors during lunch that Niranjan must be two steps ahead than what he discussed!" Despite myself, the flattery found its target.

"I understand your concern about confidentiality," the Bureau Chief continued. "In fact, you need not discuss everything in your plan with me, too."

Dnyanesh also discussed sources regarding the Kopardi gang-rape case, and he permitted me to complete paperwork and pursue threads relating to Judge Loya over the phone. That was support I had not entirely expected. It seemed like now that TRG sir had given the green light, Dnyanesh was showing the eager, encouraging side that I liked.

When I thanked him for his flexibility, Dnyanesh waved it aside.

"Niranjan," he said, "just ensure that you do this Judge Loya death story. This will be really explosive."

*

No democracy survives without license to protest, but the arts of dissent do not find foundations in chaos and frenzy. While it may not often seem like it, an effective protest is one carefully staged, its members as disciplined as they are enraged. Such was the case with the morchas, the rallies that eclipsed the Kopardi case, involving lakhs of youngsters and spreading across fifteen districts, including Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Mumbai and Thane.

Before the Investigation Team meeting, I was tasked with daily online articles covering the socio-political impact of the morchas. While filing stories, I was amazed at their planning, determination and discipline, which was analogous to an army after months of drills. Civilians simply walked to their district collectorate, without slogan or noise, and presented their memoranda. The effect was as chilling as it was bewildering. Nobody even knew the organizers behind the morchas—the 'Maratha Kranti Morcha' was simply visible on the streets for all to see, which put it on the tips of the tongues of most Indian citizens. Political parties became compelled to speak in support of their demands.

I picked up my phone, eager to kill two birds with one stone.

Jayant Sonawane was one of the morcha's social media volunteers. It was him I called, along with Manas Pagar—another good friend—for more information on the campaign, which was now hyperactive on Facebook and Twitter. The campaign stated that the morcha was spreading to Pune. My emphasis was on interviewing volunteers like Jayant and Manas, but I was also eager to visit Pune and meet a few organisers.

My friends confirmed that the online campaigning disseminated from control rooms in Pune. They summarized some of the morcha's elaborate plans.

I had reservations on the campaign's direction, which antagonized the entire Dalit community simply because the three alleged criminals were from scheduled castes. I wanted to hold the control room accountable for that. Manas assured me that he would coordinate meetings with the main organisers of the Pune morchas. That was the first bird.

Nupur Biyani had told me that she worked at Borivali—a place so far north of South Bombay that it was practically Thane—and that she wouldn't be able to speak to me during office hours. However, she was expected in Pune for a family function that weekend. I needed a formal, on-the-record statement from her. This would be my chance.

Besides, Nupur would be more comfortable to speak in Pune rather than Mumbai. Some of us prefer our simple homes to chaotic cities masquerading as melting pots, I thought, remembering Nashik, remembering my wife.

I filed my Kopardi story for the day, and spoke to Dnyanesh about the online control room. I asked him if I could visit Pune for a couple of days. I also asked him if I could interview Nupur at the same time. He said yes to both.

"But a photographer will not be available for the next two days," he added. "Seek help from a local freelance."

*

"I have talked to Nupur. She will meet us day after tomorrow," said Jayant, to my delight. "We will decide the place she meets us once she reaches Pune."

We were opposite S.P. College, Pune, at the first floor of the famous Biryani House. I had reached Hotel Royalty that night at 9 p.m. It was a long drive, but there was no rest for the wicked. Half an hour later, Jayant and Manas followed, after a long day of slogging at the Kranti Morcha's control room.

All of us were hungry and all of us loved mutton, so here we were.

I told them about the details of the Investigation Team meeting, the follow-ups with Dnyanesh and the pressing need for quotes. Jayant knew most of what I already said, but this was news to Manas Pagar—a thin, young man. Manas was extremely well-read and had earned my trust over the years. He listened attentively, as he always did, and even helped me out with my photographer problem.

"My roommate is a photographer. His name is Kiran Phokmare," Manas said in his typically courteous voice. He could photograph, video-shoot, manage acoustics, edit videos and edit on Photoshop. From the sounds of it, Kiran was a Swiss army knife when it came to such matters. Manas trusted Kiran, which meant so did I.

"Will it be possible for him to record Nupur's statement on video?" I asked him. I had not planned on it, but it sounded within Kiran's versatility. "That will also help me have something on record."

Jayant chipped in. "Sir, can't you anyway record her on a spy-cam? I think we can arrange one—"

"No," I said firmly. "Never. I want admissible evidence. The video recording has to be approved and accepted by the

person."

Indian reporters were often prone to spy-cams, either because they thought they were the second coming of Rana Ayyub, or because news networks wanted their audience to think they were watching the real CSI: India, without accounting for the fact that such theatrics nullified the evidentiary value of the testimony. This was absolutely not on the table for me.

"The culprits, whoever they are and howsoever powerful, should be punished by law," I told my friends.

I meant every word. I needed to investigate this story with a purpose that led to a logical end. Spy-cams were more a hindrance than help. The ends of publishing facts could not be corrupted by the means of its pursuit.

"I am yet to begin the investigation proper," I said, "but I have a fair idea of how dangerous this could be." I looked around. "I will only understand the proportion and gravity once I start working in Nagpur."

I only noticed my voice lower to an automatic whisper when Jayant and Manas leaned in to listen.

*

The room was aged and filthy, the stench was nauseating, and damn it, was I nervous.

When I said that the start of an investigation was the most enthralling, I was only being partly honest. While I had already informally interviewed Nupur at Hotel Royalty, and had Advocate Mihir Desai on record, something about today felt like the true dawn of the investigation. It also made me a bundle of nerves.

At least Jayant, Manas and freelancer Kiran Phokmare—whom I met last evening—went some way to reassuring me. Yesterday, after a long day of journalism for me and social media volunteering for them, we had retired to my room at Hotel Royalty. Jayant and Manas, then, told me that they would

very kindly arrange an interview room at the control room's ground floor.

"Sir, Nupur has come to Pune," Jayant had added. "Her family is looking for a groom for Apurva Loya. She won't have a lot of time, but she will meet you for at least an hour."

Precious little time in my book, but it would have to do.

Kiran the freelancer was young and enthusiastic with a reassuring smile. He said that he had already arranged for an excellent camera, boom microphone and tripod.

"I will set up everything first and leave the place so that you can start your discussion," Kiran said. He seemed like a stand-up guy, thankfully.

"We are expecting a few more friends here, and won't be able to discuss this any further," Kiran said. "Actually, I also do not know what this is about," he added, curious.

Manas spared me the awkward conversation with a joke. "When we advertise it in a newspaper, we will share it with you!"

I should have slept early last night. Instead, I ate mutton biryani again and discussed the sorry state of Indian politics with volunteers until it was past 1 a.m. Perhaps that was part of the present nerves, but I couldn't help it. I was a talker.

The place of interview was a plain wooden cabin. It had an old table, three chairs and stank like a dead skunk. I cleaned the room as much as humanly possible. Jayant, Manas and Kiran (bless them) aided me without my asking, but despite labouring like ants, we could never rid the room of its reek.

Truly the most auspicious of venues, I thought, grimly.

We were having chai and chatting when Nupur Biyani entered. She was with a friend.

Nupur and I greeted each other as if we had made acquaintance for years, even though we had only met once prior. I

suppose it was true that reliving trauma tethered people together.

"Is it okay to discuss everything in front of her?" I hope I was not impolite.

"Sir, she knows everything," she replied. "I told her about our previous meeting as well."

"Very well, then." Unforeseen variables made me wary, but Nupur had trusted me with this story, and I needed to trust her back. Besides, I had an ask.

"I want to record this interview on conversation and on camera," I told her for the first time. "Of course, you have all liberty to say no, but I will have a good point to start my investigation work if you agree to my request."

"I... have no problem with that," Nupur said. "My mom will get very angry if she knows this." She looked hesitant.

Anuradha again.

I cursed my stars. Nupur's mother seemed the most important eyewitness of the event. Her words would arbitrate truth and lies for most of my investigation. But from what Jayant and Nupur told me, even Armageddon would not move her. I had met many such stubborn minds before. Finding the keys to their lock was more art than science. Admittedly, I had mixed results on the matter.

"I won't tell this to your mother at all," I said quickly. "I will also not use your video interview in my story. Even if your mother or other relatives do not speak to me on record."

I only needed Nupur's recording since her statements and anecdotes would help as points of reference, to cross-check future findings during the investigation. I had no intention of involving her name in this business. The extent of the present government's fervour was such, that it would put her life at stake.

Nupur agreed.

The volunteers left. Kiran set up the tripod and left the three of us alone. Slowly but surely, we relived the story together—the pressures of Nupur's mama, the suspicious invite to the edge of Maharashtra, the night of the murder, the question marks over the post-mortem, the blood-soaked shirt.

This time, Nupur cried far lesser. Whenever she became emotional, she squeezed her friend's hand, and the friend patted her head. She proved to be useful. It expedited the process.

After over an hour, Nupur was done.

"I want justice," she ended, "not only because Judge Loya was my mama, but also because criminals should never dare to threaten or kill a judge. Or else, the poor and needy would never get justice."

I offered Nupur tea or coffee, but she was in a hurry to return home. Family awaited.

I exited the rotten room along with Nupur and her friend, my mind already on its next objective. At point of farewell, I requested her to prod her mother some more. She smiled and said she would try.

I wondered whether Nupur sensed the urgency in my voice. I worried whether she would lose faith if her mom kept mum. I worried over a lot of things.

So worried was I about extracting the truth from Dr. Anuradha Biyani, that I did not realise it would be the last time I would meet her daughter.

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5. Dr. Biyani

THE control room of the Maratha Kranti Morcha was no Research and Analysis Wing in scope, but tried to be in style. Tall brick walls loomed over its large grounds, which were inundated with scooters, bikes and volunteers. Young boys and girls wore black T-shirts, cosplaying at police with walkie-talkies and half-uniforms. Some chatted in groups, some cracked irreverent jokes, and all passed their time of respite as idle hands before turning tools of the devil's workshop.

Ordinarily, I liked to mingle with the young masses—some of whom I already knew—but that noon I felt from them estranged, as if a Westerner examining the Orient. I profiled the kids while keeping an eye out for Jayant Sonawane and others. Most seemed to be of good stock. I doubt they truly believed the anti-Dalit garbage they were told to package, but I could not blame them for their compliance. Money, connections, opportunities… in a nation where a hundred humans fought tooth and nail for one posting, this was the lot of the average Indian adult.

But it was not just that. The alleged gang-rape and murder of the girl from Kopardi had welded together the fingers of North and West Maharashtra, Marathwada, Vidharbha, Khandesh and Konkan into one raging fist. The great warriors, the maha-rathas—from where the state derives its name—were once a proud caste of coastal and central Indian Kshatriyas. They were today a pitiable economic class of farmers… daily victims to the brutal agricultural economy that kept them in throes of abject poverty.

Several of the volunteers were kin to these farmers. They had seen or heard their relatives toss kilograms of onions and tomatoes on muddy streets because wholesalers would offer chump change for their produce. The farmers of Maharashtra had made too many deals with devils… and for what? The rape and murder of a Maratha girl? Of one of their own?

It was time to hit back, hit hard. Whoever was hit be damned. If, in the process, Dalits were antagonized more than they already were, did it really matter?

I finally found Jayant, Manas and Kiran Phokmare sitting on the stairs near the entrance to the dreaded building.

They stopped chatting when they saw me. "Sir, how was it?" Jayant asked, as Kiran handed me the memory card.

"Good. She is much stronger and resolute now," I recalled, pocketing the card and nodding to Kiran in thanks. "I have asked for a meeting with her aai, her mother. Let's see."

I shrugged. Confidence was low. Nupur had failed, Jayant had failed. I was not even allowed my crack at the whip. Half my mind was on the other leads Nupur had offered.

"Think I should go back to my room now." This place was beginning to depress me.

Manas looked at Jayant before he looked at me.

"Sir, return to Mumbai tomorrow morning?" he asked. "Spend this evening with us. We all want to talk about a few

things."

It sounded more as if they wanted to listen than to speak, but I did not mind. As long as they weren't trying to justify their volunteer work, Jayant and Manas were great audience. Kiran had also proved himself a professional, and had a right to know what was happening. Besides, Hotel Royalty would charge me the day's rent, since I had crossed check-out time.

"Okay," I told them. "I will file a story on the protest march by evening, so come after that."

I pace-walked to the exit gate of the Maratha Kranti Morcha's social media headquarters, one of my lesser favourite places in one of my most favourite cities. The romance of the morcha had worn off like lint from old socks. A rape had happened, a murder had happened, but the brick-headed organizers within these brick walls only wanted to fight hate with hate.

At least someone fought the good fight here, I mused, my mind on the sewer-scented room.

*

At Hotel Royalty, I worked on my story about the morchas, mind still possessed with Nupur's quotes. The girl had given me a few new leads.

The first was that Judges Shrikant Kulkarni and S.M. Modak (I knew their initials by then), who had accompanied Judge Loya on the Duronto Express to Nagpur, had also visited the family around two and a half months after his death. The second was that, shortly after, followed Mr. Mohit Shah himself, the Chief Justice of Bombay's High Court.

Jayant and Manas arrived at 7 p.m., earlier than I expected. Over coffee, I revealed to them Nupur's third lead.

"Some English magazine had written about Judge Loya's death," I said. "It was just a sentence in a larger story."

"Alright!" Jayant said, excited. "What happened to him?"

"The editor died of a heart attack the next week," I replied, and saw his face turn grim. "Nupur said she feels worried for me too, but I told her that nothing will happen to me. Nobody will be able to kill me, at least not until I break the entire story!"

I gave them a wry smile, but was only half-joking. If I was to complete the investigation with my head intact between my shoulders, I had to be prudent till the point of being paranoid.

Manas was wearing white. He always wore white.

"The family is worried," he said. "They belong to the Marwari community. The race not being a martial one, they get terrified."

I understood where he was coming from, but this sounded stereotypical. Judge Loya himself had defied such notions by not buckling to threats and bribes. But I focused on the matter at hand.

"I want just one meeting with Dr. Anuradha," I told them. "I am ready to travel to wherever she feels comfortable. Just one meeting, and I can convince her to speak on record."

"I am sure Nupur is the only one who can convince her," Jayant said. "She will surely do it, looking at how charged she is with the urge to break this news."

Soon after, other volunteers from the control room arrived. We would discuss at length on how backbreaking the social media campaign was, how the Maratha youth had emotional stakes in the morchas, how it was harbouring hatred for other communities (a cathartic experience if I do say so!) and even went out for dinner, while half my mind was still on my leads.

When Judge Loya's colleagues Modak, Kulkarni and Mohit Shah had visited the bereaved family, Nupur Biyani did not know what they spoke of. However, during the interview, she had told me that Anuj, Judge Loya's son, wrote a letter to his aunts that night. One was to Anuradha Biyani. According to Nupur, Anuradha was also present at the aforementioned meetings.

On hearing Anuradha's name twice over, I would have laughed at my luck were Kiran's camera not recording. All my eggs were collecting into one basket... one silent basket.

*

"Wake up, sir."

It took me a second to remember where I was.

Office.

The morning after dinner, I checked out of Hotel Royalty and drove straight to my office at Fort. I took no stops, for they broke my chain of thoughts, and my mind was awash with them. I reached office at 10 a.m., filed my piece on the morcha and dozed off waiting for the others, who rarely arrived before 12:30 p.m.

Saji, our office boy, had woken me up. He had a cup of chai ready.

"Sir, Dnyanesh is coming in five minutes." Saji was from Kerala, but since he was raised in Mumbai, he spoke Marathi well.

I thanked him. He left. The tea tasted like coloured water.

I sent Nupur a WhatsApp about my return to Mumbai, along with yet another reminder about introducing me to her mother, as if I hadn't hounded the poor girl enough.

One tick.

Splendid day so far.

I was stuck. I could not get to Anuj Loya's letter before getting to Anuradha, and contacting Modak and Kulkarni without evidence was suicide. I could head to Nagpur, but I did not even know where to start. My leads were evaporating like camphor.

Dnyanesh Jathar was waiting for me in his cabin. When I sat in front of him, he threw me a mute, quizzical look.

"I have Nupur Biyani on camera for an hour," I responded.

He seemed pleased.

"Excellent news. Did she say anything new?"

Dnyanesh was all smiles when he said I needn't share information with him, but we both knew that was not how THE WEEK worked.

It just so happened that, today, I had no energy for his games.

"The two coward judges Modak and Kulkarni," I began, "they did not see the family for 75 days, despite living in the same colony. They must belong to the historical legacy of the organization known for its cowardice right from British India!"

By naming the RSS without naming the RSS, Dnyanesh Jathar instantly turned nervous. He changed the subject to the morchas. I told him about the interactions I had with the volunteers and organizers. Inside, I was chuckling. Centrists are such chickens.

He asked me to file the report without delay. "It is already filed," I said, and left hurriedly.

In the conference room over lunch, I told Swagata Yadavar about my conversation. "I didn't want to show him the video interview!" I said, over her laughter.

I told her about the heart attack of the English editor. While I did not see any foul play, this was yet another reason why the bereaved family was silent as a scarecrow.

"I can't imagine the scale they must be terrified," Swagata said. She gave me a piercing glare, as if I were about to clutch my chest and follow suit. "It does not mean that you should be careless."

"Such stories cannot be done by being too careful," was my ready retort. "One will have to take a lot of risks to see it through." In my experience, too much caution made investigators too skeptical of the truth.

Both of us were too stubborn to renege on our stances, yet we happily agreed to disagree... a concept lost to some Indians.

I did show Swagata the video, which was also on my Android.

"What a grit this girl possesses," she said, while eating her food. "I really hope that you succeed in gathering all the evidence for the story."

Amey Mansabdar watched the same video with brow furrowed. With no words and only looks, I realized the string backlight and shadows in the shoot were impairing its visibility. He half-heartedly suggested editing the footage to treat the lighting of the subjects, but we both knew this to be a fanciful notion. In case of litigation, this would reduce the video's legal admissibility.

"We will reshoot if needed," I told him. "I am sure Nupur will not mind doing it again. Anyway, I do not plan to use this interview in the story."

Cheered with the day's work but weary as a wage-earner, that night I retired to my 10ft x 10ft home in Cotton Green, among the redeveloped chawls of Kala Chowky. I was welcomed by my Nilkamal plastic cupboard and TRX band, my sole society. I made myself Maggi and chai on the induction stove before curling upon the modest cot.

This, for fourteen thousand a month? Bombay was a thief.

*

Nupur Biyani had done it again.

After two days of no progress, I received a series of texts from the girl while I was at the office. "Please check," was the first curt text. The four photos that followed were of dark, blurry pages. I could not read much, but I could read 'post-mortem'.

My fingers scrolled as if in frenzy.

Two pages were completely unreadable. I tried sharpening them. I even took prints, but to no avail. Brijgopal Loya was written on a page. On another, I could only make out one complete

sentence:

Cause of death: Coronary Artery Insufficiency.

Nupur called. She was speaking in a low voice.

"Aai had these pages on her phone," she said, "but she doesn't remember who sent those to her. I know most of it is not readable, but I thought you should have it."

She must have been in office, which meant I could not continue the conversation. I gave my words of gratitude and quickly hung up the phone.

Coronary Artery Insufficiency. I dropped a text to Swagata and asked Goddess Google for answers. Exhilaration snuck upon me as Vetal upon Vikram, for the story had legs once more.

Coronary arteries supplied blood to the heart. If they were blocked, the heart would have little or no blood, and fail. Reasons for blockages ranged from smoking, high cholesterol, family history to lack of physical activities. Physical symptoms included chest pain, back pain and cold sweats. 'Coronary artery insufficiency' sounded like a scientific term for cardiac arrest.

Judge Loya, I knew, had played table tennis for twenty-eight years. Even the TT club in his colony was named after him. As far as I was aware, his family had no cardiac history.

Nupur's words at Hotel Royalty came back to me. "Mama used to play table tennis two hours a day. He was a teetotaller. He was health conscious enough even to consult aai or baba for ordinary cough or acidity!"

This day and the next, I spent playing devil's advocate for the fascist state. Swagata, the health columnist, had sent me articles that explained the symptoms, causes and impacts of Coronary Artery Insufficiency in greater detail than WebMD. I printed hard copies, took notes, wrote more questions than answers, and tried to find a rational explanation for a heart attack. I realized that if Judge Loya was some diseased man to whom

cardiac arrest was imminent, then Muhammad Ali was a Chess Grandmaster, and the BJP was socialist.

Of course, in the eyes of the court, this was still circumstantial. Absence of evidence does not prove the evidence of absence. I did not have the smoking gun yet, but my investigative instincts were afire. It is these little moments, that do not confirm truth nor lie yet nudge one away from the beaten path, that are the most important moments for the investigator, who must pursue the tracks to their logical end, as the hound chases the trail of blood.

The next morning, Swagata and I were discussing the reports over Saji's chai. I wanted to know if the post-mortem's conclusion was illogical, if my hunch would be shared by a professional. It was.

I also needed a crash course on all the medical reports that were mandatory to be generated in case of post-mortem.

Forensic recommendation report. Histopathology report. Viscera analysis.

Some medical reports were familiar, some foreign. I would need my hand on every single one of them to support my audacious charges. With my luck, they would probably be buried in a corner of the country, and its map would be charred to cinders by this corrupt, criminal establishment that called itself a government. Fortunately, I was no novice at outsmarting them:

My phone rang while Swagata and I were deep in discussion. Once again, it was Nupur.

"Sir," she said, no time for hellos. "Aai has agreed to meet you."

*

If you suspect that a source would rather cut out their tongue than spill the beans, then it is better to expedite the latter, lest they seriously consider the former. So it was with Dr.

Anuradha Biyani, who somehow seemed to have caved to her daughter's doggedness, yet I could not know if (or when) her mind would change like the wind.

"I am sharing her number with you and I suggest you talk to her and decide the day to meet," Nupur told me, but I didn't need telling twice.

A minute after, I had texted Dr. Biyani my name, my credentials, my association with Nupur, and asked if I could meet her in Dhule tomorrow. All this while, I could not believe my luck. In another life, Nupur would have made a decent reporter.

When I thanked Nupur, she said, "Sir, it is you who is doing things for us, not me."

Once more, I agreed to disagree.

My phone buzzed. Dr. Biyani had not taken long to respond. "Yes," she texted back. "We can meet in govt. hospital tomorrow morning."

In my giddy joy, I must be forgiven for thinking that this was my lucky day. Dnyanesh Jathar brought me back to earth. When I called him about my scheduled meeting in Dhule, he insisted that Janak Bhat, our Chief Photographer, accompanied me. Apparently he was bunking office on a ridiculous pretext.

I did not know if Janak Bhat was meant to be the Chief Bureau's spy, or if Dnyanesh wanted a lazy employee to be put to work, and I could not have cared less. Janak was a troublemaker, a nuisance. To trust him to film the most important source regarding Loya's death would be to trust the khap panchayat to promote feminism.

Most importantly, Amey Mansabdar was my point man. I had already briefed him on the story so far. This was not only because I would need his aid at precisely such moments, but also because he was trustworthy.

Dnyanesh would have none of it.

"Teach Janak a strong lesson if he misbehaves," was his

final compromise to my protests, as if being a schoolteacher was part of my job.

"Fine."

Nashik was neatly sandwiched between Mumbai and Dhule. It was there I planned to go, before setting out for Dhule the following morning.

"Ask him to reach Nashik by tonight," I told Dnyanesh. "I will be leaving for Dhule at 7 a.m. after picking him up from his hotel. It takes three hours to reach."

*

Those were tense three hours.

While I drove my DZire, with Janak Bhat seated besides, questions were exploding like Diwali firecrackers. What did Anuradha know? Would she speak on the record? Why agree to meet me now? Dr. Biyani was at the eye of this storm. She was one of the first to see her brother's body, the fishy post-mortem report, the bloodstained clothes. She had met with Modak, Kulkarni, Mohit Shah, and had received the letter from Judge Loya's son, Anuj. She would know things Nupur, Advocate Desai and I hadn't even heard of.

Janak was not aiding my anxiety. In the morning, he had called to tell me that his sugar had dropped to zero, which would make him late. I told him to have breakfast and be ready within the next half hour.

"Nobody can stay alive if their sugar drops to zero, so don't give me such bullshit," I told him in the car. "This interview is extremely critical and sensitive!"

He was still babbling his excuses, and erecting dams upon my flows of thought. Janak spoke Marathi very well, but what he often spoke was drivel, and this was not the time.

"I do not want you to even utter a word to the guest," I said. "Do not panic the lady."

He was still trying to justify his tantrums. As I kept ignoring his chattering, his voice dwindled from friendly, to businesslike to an eventual nonplussed silence. Good, I thought. Let it all out now.

Time passed. As usual, I took no stops. At around 10:30 a.m., Dhule was fifteen minutes away. Surely there would be no last-minute speed-breakers to contend with? I dialed my phone, and Anuradha Biyani answered.

"Please come down straightaway to the government hospital," she said curtly.

My mind was put to rest. Till then, I had sneaky suspicions that she would avoid the rendezvous, but now it seemed things were ticking. Heading straight to the hospital was an added bonus. I had no wish to linger in the city. I was too familiar a face to Dhule, and intended to keep a low profile in case Dr. Biyani was being watched.

The hospital was at the heart of the city—a sickly looking single-storied government building dyed in dirt yellow. Mahatma Phule's statue faced it, looking much more polished in comparison. During the Dhule riots of October 2008, many victims were admitted to this very building. I was no stranger to it.

I parked my car in the familiar compound and headed to the hospital, Janak in tow.

Fortunately, neither my photographer nor the hospital staff were much trouble. We were welcomed by a peon, who asked us to wait in the first room to the right. A modest-looking chamber, a large table and three chairs awaited us. Two chairs had their back to the window, while another was pointed in its direction.

I looked around. Plenty of space to shoot video.

People came and people went. None paid us any heed. The room was poorly lit—in fact, if not for the natural light from the roadside window, it would have been darker than a black hole. I

wondered what Amey would have to say about it.

He should have been here. Whatever was Dnyanes playing at?

A bespectacled, middle-aged, weary looking woma entered the room. She wore a simple saree and a pale smile on dar skin.

"Namaskar," she said. "I am Dr. Anuradha Biyani."

It took me by surprise. Nupur was the spitting image of he mother, but there was a tiredness, a matured cynicism, t Anuradha.

I stood up and folded my hands.

"Namaskar," I followed her lead. "I am Niranjan Takle."

She made small talk, enquiring about the journey and such Soon enough the conversation turned to her daughter, and therein sensed my chance.

"I am sure Nupur must have talked to you in detail about the investigation I am planning to do," I said, testing the waters.

Dr. Biyani removed her spectacles. She looked as if it was a chore for her to exist.

"Yes," she said, slowly. "My husband is completely opposed to the idea of talking to any journalist."

She stole a glance at Janak's camera.

"Now... we are more concerned for the well-being and safety of the kids, Anuj and Apurva. We have already lost our brother."

Right off the bat, Dr. Biyani coolly said she would only speak off-record. Everything in her tone told me that she was not here to spill any secrets. She even trivialized her daughter's claims, pretending as if there was no scandal to speak of. Perhaps it was her way of trying to throw me off the scent.

In hindsight, it was tragic that a mother downgraded her n daughter's allegations to stave away a greater evil—but in the oment, I saw no tragedy, only timidity.

"Yes, madam," I told her.

I could see the story fade before my eyes, the basket of gs slip from my fingers, yet I kept my composure.

"I totally understand your concern. Maybe just tell me, formally, how was your relationship with your brother?"

As expected, Dr. Biyani's face brightened.

"We were the closest," she said. "We are five sisters. Brij as younger to me. He was so joyful... an extremely caring rother."

She told me of how Brijgopal Loya helped his large friend rcle within, and outside, the town of Latur. As she doted about her te brother's work ethic, sincerity, fitness, honesty, love and care for ll family members, the doctor seemed to have lost her years.

She began speaking about the Sohrabuddin trial.

"He was under... a lot of pressure," she said, measuring er words well. "I remember... we all had gathered during Diwali n Gategaon. He had told me that he asked for a transfer, or was even prepared for voluntary retirement."

This was news to me. It seemed as if Judge Loya was subject to political pressures more than a month before his death. Worse still, Dr. Biyani also knew of it at the time.

"Brij told me," the doctor continued, her voice inflecting in pride, "that he would do farming after voluntary retirement instead of compromising with judicial values!"

"Ohh," I said. "That is... shocking, and still a thing to be immensely proud of."

My words were praiseworthy, but inside, my sadness was turning to seething rage. I did not know Mr. Loya, and the Judge

cared two hoots for me in his life. So why was I running after desk editors and advocates for a helping hand or half a quote, while the victim's own so-called loving sister hid behind jaundiced walls?

This was, however, not the time for my homilies. Dr. Biyani was speaking, and my job was to listen. Besides, I had not given up the ghost of getting her on camera. Pulling the heartstrings was still my best shot at quotes… or clues.

"Your brother must be a man of great morals and ethics," I prodded. "A rare breed these days."

In spite of my motives, I meant every word. I knew too many who would have bent or broken under pressure, but the more I learned about Judge Loya, the more he seemed the sole voyager of justice amid schemers and sycophants.

"Of course he was." Dr. Biyani now had watery eyes, helpless eyes. I still struggled for sympathy. Why mourn a man's murder when you make no effort to avenge him?

Yet gently, I continued to push. "But, madam," I asked, "there must have been some reason for him to confide so much into you. Why do you think he must have talked so much with you?"

"We were close right from childhood," she said. "Even my daughter had stayed with him in Mumbai during her studies. You know, I used to fight for him when we were kids."

But as surely as I saw the rising sun from the east and the setting sun in the west, I saw no fighting sibling before my eyes.

"He must have thought that you would fight for him even now," I said. "He was a judge. He delivered justice to many. Now the man expects justice for himself."

She didn't respond. I hesitated a second, then chose not to check my tongue.

"You know what has happened to him. I do too. And if we cannot bring justice to him, then neither you nor me will forgive ourselves for the rest of our lives. So… will his sister fight for

him?" I goaded. "Or will he be disappointed this time?"

Janak threw me an uneasy glance. Anuradha burst into tears. Seconds later, she spoke.

"I will tell you everything. On the record."

*

As Janak hurriedly set up the tripod and cameras, Anuradha Biyani kept telling me not to share with anybody that I spoke to her.

"I give you my word," I replied, intimating in the tone of my voice that I was not new to this.

She told me about the magazine that covered Loya's death, and the editor who passed away within the week.

"You, too, take all the precautions," she said, a knowing look to her eyes. "I will also give you Anuj's letter that he wrote after Mohit Shah visited his house."

Fear was the only factor on the good doctor's mind, but this was a bold step I had not expected. Not only did Anuradha and her daughter look alike, deep down they shared the same blood that boiled for retribution.

Janak began recording the video, and I asked Anuradha my first question: "What was the case your brother Brijgopal Loya was presiding over, when he suspiciously died in Nagpur?"

For over an hour continued the questions and answers. I had a long list. Anuradha kept crying, kept repeating how frightened she was for the children. Janak gasped and made audible shows of shock whenever she revealed a disturbing fact. He wasn't helping. I worried that it would spook Dr. Biyani, and she would send us home empty-handed. My eyes flickered at the closed door, and I had sudden visions of thugs breaking into the room and destroying Janak's camera.

Neither happened.

After the interview, our chief photographer made the poor woman pose for what felt a hundred pictures—on the chair, against the wall, holding a stethoscope, at the door, in her office, near her office and even outside the yellowed building. If the most important source of my story was not within earshot, I would have threatened to sap all the sugar from Janak's useless brain. Instead, I glanced around with increasing paranoia, hoping we had not been made.

I don't think we were, but in this trade, one is never certain.

Before we knew it, we were back in the car, and en route to Nashik. My fingers excitedly drummed on my steering wheel. I kept checking my rear-view, but we were not tailed. I kept thinking about the story, and Janak kept interrupting my thoughts.

He told me to look for a dhaba, a roadside restaurant, as he had an upset stomach. Perhaps it was his anxiety, though it did not stop his tongue.

"What a great interview! Charged with emotions!" He kept scrolling through his thousand pictures on his DSLR. "Initially I thought she would not speak on camera at all. But you made her speak with great skill!"

"Always had confidence," I said as modestly as I could, parking near a dhaba.

Inside, my heart was racing. I had Nupur Biyani, Advocate Desai, the suspicious post-mortem, Anuj Loya's letter and even Anuradha Biyani on my side. Jayant Sonawane had helped me stumble upon the biggest story of my career, but I was putting together the pieces with alarming pace, before anybody could even take stock. Another journalist would have hastened for print, but my work was not yet over. Without Real and Demonstrative evidence, I was not letting up.

The investigation was ongoing... but it was going places.

I cannot entirely explain what dawned upon me after Janak

Bhat rushed to the dhaba's toilet, and I saw his camera staring back at me. Perhaps, now that his chattering had ceased, and the car afforded sweet silence for my thoughts, I could see the importance of Dr. Biyani's statement with greater clarity. Perhaps it was simple paranoia. Or perhaps the notorious Janak oozed around him such an aura of distrust, that this was inevitable.

Whatever the motive was, the result was that I fished out the memory card from his DSLR. While I waited, I copied the video files of the interview on my laptop. If nothing else, this was for the safety of the interview as well as the interviewer.

After Janak returned, we set off for Nashik. We would stop there for a bit and then head to Mumbai. There, I would drop the chief photographer at Sion, before driving to Cotton Green. During the journey, part of my mind was on Anuj Loya's letter, which I was yet to properly peruse. Another part wondered how on earth I would find the medical reports—if they even existed anymore. Perhaps Anuj would shed light on the matter.

I would not know at the time, that while my instinctive act of copying Anuradha's interview was not even at the forefront of my thoughts, it would be one of my best decisions.

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6. Young Anuj

TODAY, Chief Justice of Maharashtra, Mr. Mohit Shah, came to meet us, after 2 ½ months of Dad's death. I could completely see the guilt on his face…

Cotton Green welcomed me as the sea welcomes the suicidal man. The ecstasy of getting Anuradha Biyani to talk made me forget what ghosts from her black box I wished to see. Even as she spoke, even as Janak Bhat recorded, relief and paranoia had made such a dirty mixture that I failed to make my mind think beyond—beyond evidences and camera footages and column inches and office politics to what the story was actually about, and who were forced to live it. It took five paragraphs from a twenty-something to set my mind straight.

…I fear that these politicians can harm any person from my family and I am also not powerful enough to fight with them…

Sleep was out of the question tonight, so I set myself to work. I was told that Anuj Loya looked a weedy boy, still

struggling with the surprises of puberty.. He was around my daughter's age. The kid had probably not killed a mosquito his whole life.

…I told him everything related to Dad's death and have also asked him to set up an enquiry commission, for Dad's death. I fear that to stop us from doing anything against them they can harm anyone of our family members. There is threat to our lives…

I shut my laptop. It didn't help.

The home had no liquor, nothing to drown the words swirling in my caged mind. I picked up my phone instead, eyes eager for distractions. Dr. Biyani had pinged me back. I had texted her after I read the letter, before reading it a thousand times again. I had questions: why write a letter, not an entry in a diary? Why send it to his aunts over WhatsApp? Was helplessness to such a degree choking his throat, coating his lungs, or was he trying to goad his elders into action?

"You could be right," the doctor had texted back. "But we too are scared for the lives of all the children in our family."

…I hereby state that, if anything natural or whatsoever, happens to anyone in my family – Grandfather, Grandmother, my sister, or my mom and even me, Chief Justice MOHIT SHAH will be responsible for it…

The Loyas were not alone in their fear. As I aged, I saw my India turn upside down. When I was a boy, a man named Ashok Beg swept and swabbed Nashik's municipal corporation home, which was near ours. He taught me lezim, the Marathi folk dance. Ashok cleaned every day, even every Ganesh Chaturthi. A Hindu family, a Hindu festival, a Muslim cleaner, and nobody cared.

I remembered stories of my grandfather, banished by us Brahmins for opening the first Nashik restaurant for all castes, back in 1909. Ajoba was brave enough to serve tea to lower-caste

karmacharis, brave enough to break norms that made no sense.

Back then, Indians were Indians. A different opinion was no reason to label one an anti-national, a bhakt, a troll. There were always exceptions, always trends, but I could say with complete certitude that the country was never this sensitive, never this sinister... never this hostile.

Today, India slaved to a regime that might as well replace the lotus with the cloak and dagger. Worse yet, apathy had filled the streets like black fog. Filth was such a part and parcel of the average Indian politician's portfolio, that if you told a citizen that their local leader was a murderer, they would look at you with such supreme indifference—as if to say "so what?"—that you would wonder if you were wasting their time.

Yeats drifted in my mind: the best lack all conviction, the worst full of passionate intensity...

...I have asked a few questions about the fact that only he knew but; he clearly said that all these facts were incorrect (he was disagreeing with the fact)...

I would die to be reborn in the past, but at least I lived it once. I could rebel in my youth when I was allowed to rebel. When rabid-minded minions had not led yatras to tear apart a mosque, when the streets of Gujarat were not awash with trishuls and blood, when universities and libraries were not lathi-charged.

But this was the reality of the new generation. This was Anuj Loya's reality, my daughter's reality. Anuj knew his father had been killed, he thought Mohit Shah was involved, and that the Chief Justice was but a puppet. What could he do? Make his letter public? Stage a protest? Revolt? Better people had tried, for their own reasons. Activists, journalists, students, lawyers, entire political parties, his own father. Tried and failed.

I slept but a wink, and awoke at the crack of dawn to tired

eyes and a rumbling stomach. Nothing I ate settled. Once more, I texted Dr. Biyani.

"I would love to meet Anuj once," I requested. "I hope to give some positive vibes to him."

I needed to talk to him, but I also needed to get him to talk—be it about his ambitions, favourite films or fidget spinners. All this while, his last lines screamed inside my head, almost demanding for help. Fitting, as they were written in capitals.

...IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO ME OR MY FAMILY MEMBERS, CHIEF JUSTICE, MOHIT SHAH AND OTHERS INVOLVED IN THE CONSPIRACY WILL BE RESPONSIBLE.

Signed, Anuj Loya 18.2.15

*

"I am not going to work with Janak again."

Amey, Swagata and I were in the conference room of THE WEEK. As per, I had reached office that morning at 10 a.m. and, as per, Swagata was already there. We shared small talk over Saji's tea, but as soon as Amey arrived, I asked the two of them for their time. They understood at once.

I told them about Dhule, Dr. Biyani and the contents of the letter. I could see shock on their faces, but my own was stiller than stone. Amey and Swagata were my work wives, but I reserved soul-searching days for my family.

However, in one form or another, I did want to vent, and thus condensed my ire at the chief photographer.

"He started the day with a nonsense argument—that his sugar has gone down to zero. Constantly he was blabbering baloney. He made Dr. Biyani literally pose as a model for over hundred pictures. She had just wept like a baby and was visibly in

pain! At least he didn't disturb her during…"

A shuffle of footsteps and the yawning door interrupted us. Speak of the devil, I thought, but Janak Bhat was not alone. Dnyanesh was alongside.

"Great work, Niranjan!" the bureau chief was saying, smiling his kindly smile. "Just incredible! Janak just now showed me the recording..."

One minute later, Dnyanesh and I were in his office. I cursed myself for my stupidity. Dnyanesh and Janak lived in the same Sion complex—of course he had access to the video whenever he wished! All that planning, and I had forgotten to factor the bloody obvious.

"Sir," I said, once again, "this is extremely serious. You stay at a complex where more than 200 journalists and their families live." The more I heard myself speak, the worse it sounded.

Dnyanesh kept trying to interrupt me, but I forgot the concept of seniority.

"Janak can disclose this video to anyone, to everyone. We know how impulsive he is. He has zero integrity! My first condition," I reminded him, "was for total confidentiality."

"That's… true." Dnyanesh looked genuinely taken aback, and I felt a little apologetic. "I did not realize… well, luckily, he showed it to me before we picked up another journalist on the way to office. But he was praising you for the brilliant manner you made her speak on the record…"

This is no time for flattery.

"Exactly," I replied. "That's how easily he can get tempted. I do not want to sacrifice my story. You and I both know that this has happened with me in the past. I will refuse to work with him. In

writing."

Dnyanesh nodded with dignity. "I will warn him in the strictest possible manner."

The bureau chief seemed on my side, but he was placating more than listening. If he listened not to me but to the journalist inside of himself, he would know where I was coming from, and all this posturing would be unnecessary. In a bid to awaken that journalist, I shared with him the contents of Anuj Loya's letter.

"A visit for expressing condolences by the Chief Justice does not console the victim," I ended, grave. "It instils deep fear in their mind."

Perhaps I had a human moment with him, perhaps I had not. One could never tell with Dnyanesh. But I was in no mood to read minds. "I am trying to meet Anuj himself," I told him. "I don't know whether he would speak, but I will have Amey with me. Not Janak."

Without waiting for his response, I stood up and went to my desk. I could feel his eyes on the back of my head.

*

The main building of the Constitution Club of India stands at a cool five-minute drive from Connaught Place, New Delhi. It is an imposing edifice dyed with brown and white, with large windows acting as backdrop to the proudly mounted tricolour. This was where Dr. Ambedkar, Rajendra Prasad, N. Madhava Rao and many others had drafted the Constitution of India.

It was also where I was cordially invited to speak about Sangh Terror and Failures of Justice.

The seminar was hosted by ANHAD (Act Now for Harmony And Democracy), founded and administered by Shabnam Hashmi, the famous human rights activist. She had

initially invited Ram Puniyani, but Ram sir recommended m name instead, since he thought I would have more to share on th subject.

I couldn't tell you how humbled I was to receive the invit let alone enter the Deputy Speaker Hall. I did not believe i temples, but this was a temple of democracy—a room filled wi lawyers from the High Court, Supreme Court, part spokespersons, prominent social activists, etc. It was the first tim I spoke with Sitaram Yechury, Shashi Tharoor and Kanhaiy Kumar.

Amidst the who's who, I caught the eye of an old, baldin man. He wore a white shirt, Nehru jacket, grim spectacles and piercing stare. I recognized the face instantly, for in recent days, was on mainstream news.

Harsh Mander is here?

Harsh sir was another renowned social activist. He wa also at the forefront of the latest news cycle for his trifles wit courts. In 2015, Rubabuddin Sheikh had filed a Criminal Revisio Application before Bombay High Court, challenging Amit Shah' discharge. That application was conveniently withdrawn a mont after. Harsh sir sought an investigation into the circumstances.

His petition was already rejected by the Bombay Hig Court, so he went to the Supreme Court instead. No such luck.

"When the person is genuinely aggrieved then the issu takes a different colour, but when the person is not remotely connected and wants to revive the case then it's a differen dimension," the bench of Sharad Bobde and Ashok Bhushan ha said. There was no official reason stated in the order itself, but news reports suggested that it was on grounds of no Locus Standi... a fancy way of saying that Mander had no right to be heard.

The law is rigged, and the regime are the riggers.

I was the first speaker of the first session, shedding light on e threatened legacy of Hemant Karkare. Before he was agically killed on 26/11, Karkare led the probe into the 2008 alegaon blasts. I shared my findings on the machinations behind e 2006 Malegaon blasts, its connections to the bombings in 008, lesser-known facts regarding RSS leaders Indresh Kumar nd Mohan Bhagwat, conspiracies to create a Hindu state in hailand, Israel or Nepal, and several other stories that hronologically covered militant Hinduism. Harsh sir listened atiently on the first row.

After two more talks, ANHAD broke for tea. I had given a ood speech, my stock was high, but the longer I postponed my hat with Harsh, the farther it would fall. This was my chance.

I found him with a cup in hand and deep in discussion with someone.

"Interesting speech," he said, when I approached him. His rows arched in curiosity. I caught sincerity in those serious eyes, nd immediately realized that Harsh Mander was not the kind to waste a syllable out of politeness.

We got to talking. I asked him about his failed petition, without divulging any details about Judge Loya. It was surprisingly easy to get him to speak.

"Advocate Mihir Desai was one of the reasons I filed the petitions," Mr. Mander told me.

Rubabuddin's lawyer. I recalled the crumbling building, the office of towering law books. "He told me that, after a month of filing the Criminal Revision Application, Rubabuddin appeared in the High Court without Advocate Desai," Harsh sir continued.

I was confused. "Wasn't the Advocate his lawyer?"

He nodded. "Yes. Rubabuddin was withdrawing his petition with some other lawyer. It was all behind Desai's back."

"What happened then?"

"He rushed to the court with his colleagues. Rubabuddin was shivering. Sweating. He was on the verge of crying. He was begging Justice Anuja Prabhudesai to grant his withdrawal. Desai pleaded to the honourable court to speak to Rubabuddin in person, in-chamber. He wanted to confirm that he was withdrawing voluntarily, not under duress."

Harsh sir was slightly frowning, but one would think he was making small talk about sports.

If Rubabuddin had not succumbed to terror, then Mihir Desai would have fought his case, but if the client wished to withdraw, the advocate's hands were tied. Now I understood why Harsh sir had tried to make the matter public.

While I talked about failures of justice, Rubabuddin Sheikh was living through them. I pictured his panic attacks as pangs of painful realization, that he must submit to injustice or be slaughtered. I pictured Anuj Loya penning his letter to no one who could help, crying the same tears, fighting the same fears.

I had covered petty politicians, suicidal farmers, cattle extortionists, but I had never felt a personal stake in them.

*

Since A Lamb, Lionized went to print, several BJP trolls had erected homes on my Facebook timeline, like dirty lice nesting in clean tufts of hair. I marked-as-read several notifications with an absent mind, a mind still stuck on Anuj and Rubabuddin.

The Maratha Kranti Morcha had far from subsided. Neither had my duties. Day after day, I filed report after report on the gang-rape. Whenever I found repose from that, the other half of my tranquil mind—as it doom-scrolled through abuse and fake-news—revised the words of the letter. None of it seemed

insincere. He was telling the truth, or at least he believed he was.

Nupur Biyani told me that her mother was helping me in this regard. Before I had left for New Delhi, she and I had a nice chat over the phone.

"Aai felt very relieved after talking to you," she had said. "She highly appreciates your passion and commitment. She is going to talk to Anuj also."

Since then, only silence on that front.

A face on Facebook was staring back at me. Vaibhav Chhaya, a former colleague, was stating some difficulties for Scheduled Caste post-graduation students. Apparently, the government had stopped giving them grants. I chuckled. On the one hand, lower-caste MD students were losing their crutches to complete their degrees. On the other, racists with a hundred computers and an army of green boys churned anti-Dalit content in Pune, for sixteen hours a day.

My eyes widened. That's it!

I quickly texted Vaibhav, wanting to know more about his Facebook post. He knew I was a journalist, and called right away.

"Sir," he said, "A monthly Freeship is constitutionally mandatory for Scheduled Caste students who are pursuing post-graduations."

I asked if one particular faculty was suffering. "Yes," he replied. "Some of my friends who are doing their MD are facing extremely serious problems."

Vaibhav very kindly offered to lend my number to a couple of them. "Tell them to meet me in person," I said, before hanging up.

An unknown number called me within the minute. I felt a rush of sorrow. Sometimes, spending dull days in a cushy office in

Fort, could make me forget of the torrential nation outside, where people were regular preys to the regime's predatory political games—desperate for help from the first person who took notice.

"Sir, Vaibhav asked us to meet you," the caller said. "Six of us will come."

"Alright." I gave him my office address. "Meet me at four."

I worked on my stories, counting down the clock. They arrived precisely at four. We assembled in the conference room. One of them spoke for the six.

"We all belong to Schedule Castes, and are pursuing MD in J.J. Hospital. I am doing it in Pathology, while the others are in Forensic, Medicine, Ortho, etc."

If Swagata was in office, she could have attended the meeting with me, since healthcare was her beat for THE WEEK. As it was, I had to ask him to stop, repeat and explain terms that went over my head. No matter. I took diligent notes, and waited for my moment.

"We are all entitled for a monthly Scholarship," he was saying, as I scribbled ferociously. "It is mandated by the Constitution. Here is the specific document." He handed me a photocopy.

"Our scholarship has not been paid to us since 2014. It covers our fees, education and expenses for living. Some of us even saved within that grant, and sent it to our parents. Now... even living has become difficult."

The man was sounding increasingly helpless. Much like a spokesperson, he seemed under pressure to justify the extent of their injustice. I needed no convincing. A government ignoring its own constitution for two years, flouting Freeships for Dalits? This story needed to be told... but I also had my own irons in the fire.

"I will need specific cases," I said. "There must be such students in medical colleges across the state. Perhaps Nagpur? There could be students who received that scholarship in 2013, but not the year after, since this is a two-year post-graduation."

I asked if I was right. They all said yes.

"Do you know any such students in the Government Medical College in Nagpur? I could meet them. I am planning to go there."

"Of course!" one said eagerly. "We have an association with a student organization. We'll get the numbers of the students."

I thanked them, treated them to Saji's water chai, and promised that I would write a big story on the matter. "Just ask those in Nagpur to help me."

Step one of one thousand.

Without the medical records, Judge Loya's murder was a controversial tale, but a tale of he-said-she-said. But the G.M.C. Hospital in Nagpur was where Judge Loya's post-mortem had happened, and where his records were stored. This was the first genuine ray of light at the end of a long and dark tunnel, at the end of which awaited a glimmer of ultimate truth.

Excited, I texted Nupur and Dr. Biyani. I opened my diary, started connecting dots and drawing flow-charts. An hour passed, then two. Then three. My mind-map sprouted more questions than answers, but it also bred confidence. My malaise had been broken. The longer I spent pondering over the impossible probabilities, the vague contingencies, the more assured I felt about the situation.

Dnyanesh Jathar's cabin was empty. He was off to Delhi for a meeting. I scratched my beard. My heart made rapt knocks against my ribs.

Shall I risk it?

Since the Janak Bhat incident, I trusted the bureau chief as much as I trusted the Sanatan Sanstha. But here and now, I had a golden chance to rush to Nagpur without his delays, without his interference, that were cloaked by his pseudo-paternal aura.

I immediately scolded myself. Are you drunk, Niranjan?

I mistrusted Dnyanesh, but he was my superior, and would be held responsible should anything happen to me. He had a right to know when I would move to Nagpur, for it was the lion's den. If these criminals could murder a CBI Special Court Judge, who the hell cared for a Special Correspondent?

...I fear that these politicians can harm any person from my family and I am also not powerful enough to fight with them...

I was thinking like a renegade, trying to prove something to a boy I had never met. It was unprofessional. Instinctively, my eyes searched my phone. It found a text message, but this was not the distraction I was hoping for.

Nupur Biyani had texted me back. "Aai has told Anuj that one of mama's old friends would visit him in the next two days. I will call you in the evening for details."

It took me a second to realize that I was meant to be that friend.

I felt numb. This was a bad tactic. Nobody liked being lied to, and I would eventually have to tell him the truth. How would he take it? And what was the point of fighting deceit and dishonesty, if the resistance employed the same tactics?

Nevertheless, I called Amey. He was on an assignment with our Bollywood reporter. "We will have to go to Pune for a couple of days. Can we drive down tomorrow?"

"Of course!" he answered, as if waiting for this question his entire life. "Just have a word with Dnyanesh."

"I will call him tomorrow morning when he is at the airport for his return flight. You reach Dadar by 8:30 a.m."

Amey laughed. He understood everything that I did not say. "Okay, let's meet in the morning."

Shortly after, my phone buzzed. Nupur.

"Sir," she began, "Aai has talked to Anuj. Aai has told him that you are also a lawyer. You knew Judge Loya closely after meeting him in a few conferences. You had gone abroad for a few years and came to know about mama's death on your return. You happened to meet aai in Mumbai and called her for condolences. She sent you the contact number of Anuj, and she liked the idea of you meeting him."

I listened as patiently as I could, but midway through, lost faith in the elaborate fable.

"Why did your aai have to lie? I cannot pretend in front of such an intelligent and sensitive young boy. Now this is a shaky situation for me."

Nupur insisted that there was no other way. She said Anuj would have refused to meet me otherwise. He would have created a huge scene if Dr. Biyani told her nephew that she spoke on-camera. I trusted Nupur enough to trust her judgement, but I didn't like any of this.

I hung up the phone, glum. While I worried over whether I could build on a relationship birthed on a lie, I forgot to ask if Anuj Loya knew my name.

*

As the DZire cranked 100 km/hr on the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, I shot a sideways glance at my favourite photographer, and wondered how long it was since we had last worked on a story.

Amey Mansabdar was a newly married man, but that did not deter him from leaving his desk to face risky assignments. We had a history of working in tandem, traveling to some of the grimmest districts of Maharashtra. Amey was tall, smart and hardworking. More than that, he was compassionate. I recalled how watery his eyes would get when we spoke to widows of farmers.

I had called Dnyanesh around 7 a.m., informing him about Anuj Loya and our two-day tour to Pune. He approved, heartily wishing me luck. His enthusiasm made me feel guilty for informing him so late. This was part of my plan, of course. Had I updated him while he was in Delhi, Sachidananda Murthy and R. Prasannan would have heard it five minutes later, and the bureau chief may have had mysterious second thoughts.

The moment we entered Pune, we checked into Hotel Royalty. Before we got to work, I called Manas Pagar. "Let's meet whenever you have time. Inform Jayant also."

Over coffee and sandwiches, Amey and I discussed strategy. The primary concern was how to approach the boy. I took a bite while scrolling through my Facebook trolls.

"We cannot even take out the camera without permission," I said, contrite. Before telling him what I knew, and before convincing him to help, I would need to gently untangle the lies. Lawyers hardly visited family friends with cameramen.

"True," said Amey. "No point in pushing or provoking him. He may stop everyone else from talking to you."

"Yes. Anuj—"

I froze. I had just seen Anuj Loya's face on my Facebook profile, in the 'People You May Know' category.

The bell rang. Jayant Sonawane and Manas Pagar entered, curious and chatty. I introduced Amey to them, for it was the first

time they made acquaintance, and quickly turned to Facebook. My Punekar friends peered at my laptop screen.

I told them about Anuradha Biyani's lie, before pointing to his face on my profile.

"According to the algorithm," I said, gloomy, "people who search for your profile eventually appear on your wall in the 'People You May Know' category."

Young Anuj had checked my profile, which clearly mentioned I was Special Correspondent for THE WEEK. If he knew his way around the Internet, he would soon find out that I was an investigative journalist whose beat was politics.

"Why would Anuj talk to me now? This false identity was bound to be problematic. I never wanted any such thing."

Manas was incandescent. "Nupur's mom should have given some thought before saying anything like this! At least she should have discussed this with you!"

His rage took us all aback. I had never seen him so distressed.

"Jayant!" Manas continued, oblivious to our reactions, "You call her. Speak to her sternly about this mess!"

"I agree!" Jayant suddenly sprang into action, fishing out his phone. "In fact, I will speak to Nupur also. They should understand that you are doing all this for them!"

I snatched the phone from his hands. "No! Sit!"

An awkward, shameful second of silence followed. The three of us had lost our cool. For Jayant and Manas this was forgivable, since they were in their twenties, and were outsiders peeping into the chaotic realm of Indian journalism. I, as a veteran, should have been composed.

"There is… no point in talking about this to them," I said,

after a breath. "It will only make them feel guilty."

I looked back at Jayant. "Also, I am not doing this story for them. It is my duty to tell the truth and shame the devil. It is they who are helping me seek the truth. They have already paid a price for that."

Jayant looked unconvinced but became silent.

Amey collapsed on a chair. "True. We should think about how to go ahead with the present challenge."

"I will message Nupur and her mom that we will be visiting tomorrow," I told Amey. "Let Anuj also use the time to sink in… whatever he learned. I will message the boy, and ask him the address." I respected Dr. Biyani, but perhaps it was time to open lines of dialogue with the boy himself, instead of relying on an unreliable mediator.

After lunch, we returned to my room with good news and bad. The former was that Anuj had pinged me back with an address. He asked me to meet him the next day at 4 p.m. At least, after all that had happened, he was not averse to meeting me.

When I informed Nupur and Dr. Biyani about the update, Nupur pinged me back with the bad news.

"According to Nupur," I told my friends, "Dr. Biyani told Anuj that I have returned to India after living in Dubai. For two years." I could have banged my head against the wall.

"This is endless!" Amey laughed aloud. "What if he asks you about your profession in Dubai, and then contradicts you with your own Facebook posts over the years?!"

"Let's stop thinking about this!" I told them. "It is draining my brain."

That evening, the four of us went to the terrace of Hotel Royalty, and soaked in its brilliant ambience. We ate (and drank)

dinner, chatted till our jaws were sore and made lemonade from sour lemons. I was far from a teetotaller, which made nights like these perfectly ordinary, but in hindsight I realized how much I should have savoured it. I suppose it is not my fault for not counting my stars, since I couldn't possibly have known that the next day would leave on me a personal scar… one that has still not healed.

*

Amey Mansabdar's phone rang like an alarm bell. I awoke, groggy, and saw him pacing the room, his cell pressed to his ear.

"Yes, sir," he was saying. "Our appointment got fixed for today. He has asked us to meet him at his house in the evening."

Amey saw that I was awake. He shook his head assuredly.

Dnyanesh.

Whenever the bureau chief wanted updates on my tours, he typically called the photographer instead of me. Honesty had long left our sinusoidal dynamic. I respected his efforts, but trying to get Amey to snitch was a sorry strategy. Amey was curt, hung up as soon as he answered, and told me everything Dnyanesh had asked him.

"Sir, what is your plan?" Amey asked me, after we ate breakfast.

"None so far," I said, truthfully. "I am not able to think of a way. I will probably start with a general ONQ. Open Neutral Question," I added, answering Amey's puzzled face. "It is asked to make the person give a broad answer. Usually, this makes you feel relaxed while talking. Later, you can go for leading questions or closed questions."

"Oh, okay." Amey seemed awestruck. "Is this another technique you devised?"

I laughed. "No, this was taught to us in television reporting!"

He seemed sheepish. "No other reporter talks so much with us photographers; not only about the story, but also the different ways and techniques to approach the subject."

I knew this all too well. Most of my peers were different degrees of elitist. "I do it because I was once a TV journalist and understand the importance of visuals. Impeccable visuals become possible only when the cameraman understands the soul of the story. That's why I say that THE WEEK should call a photographer as photojournalist."

I needed alone time to prepare. While Amey went for a walk near the Deccan Gymkhana, I sequenced my ONQs, took out my diary, my notes and a copy of Anuj's letter. I needed to memorize anything that was relevant.

I wouldn't dare take out a notepad without Anuj's consent. The boy was spooked enough.

*

At five minutes to four, our rickshaw halted at the gate.

The two of us lumbered towards it with our backpacks. The building looked new and exceptionally tidy, even though it was hard to find. A security guard gave us a frown and asked us our names. The moment he heard mine, the brows relaxed. The Loyas had clearly instructed security about our visit.

The guard entered our names in a register and walked us to the specific floor. I repeated my QNQs in my head, wondering what sort of audience I would find.

A minute after we knocked, the door opened. An old man in a dhoti and khadi vest faced us. Behind him lurked a thin boy with a long face. Anuj Loya was taller than I imagined.

"I am Niranjan," I said to the old man, who immediately welcomed us in.

The drawing room was simple, but rather neat. Two single-seater sofa chairs faced each other, between which was sandwiched a comfortable three-seater sofa. The old man, presumably the grandfather, sat on the larger sofa, while Anuj sat beside him. The rest of the Loya family was nowhere to be seen.

Amey and I occupied the single seaters.

I sat near the old man, and it was me he addressed first. "My name is Harkishan," he said. "Anuj's grandfather."

Harkishanji looked like he was in his mid-eighties. His skin was tanned as a hardworking farmer, his voice was coarse, but there was a rural kindness to his eyes.

I thought to talk about the journey, but was interrupted.

"How did you know my father?" Anuj was looking at me. "Aunt said you are also a lawyer." He spoke in impeccable Marathi.

I returned his stare. The boy wore a chequered shirt. He looked sad, but there was an intensity, an urgency to his despair. Was this question asked to verify me, my credibility? My fingers and toes grew cold. Behind the boy, Amey stared intently at me.

Stick to the truth, a voice said. Makes life simpler.

"Anuj," I replied, "I am a journalist. I work for THE WEEK. That is how I know about your father. Your aunt was not sure whether you would meet me. That is why she must have told you that I am a lawyer. But as an investigative journalist, I am working on the story of your father's mysterious death. That is the reason I wanted to talk to you."

Silence followed for a minute that felt like an hour. The faces of our hosts became a complete blank. No one addressed

what I said. Anuj stared at Harkishanji, Amey stared at me, and I didn't know whom to stare at.

The boy stood up. "I will bring water," he said, to no one in particular. He opened a door behind my sofa.

The moment Anuj was out of earshot, Harkishanji turned to me. He was angry.

"Why do you want to write about Brij's death now? It has been over one and a half years. No reporter has written a word about him!"

"I believe that, being a journalist," I simply said, "it is my duty to seek truth, and put it in front of the world."

While Harkishanji gave me a searching look, my ears suddenly pricked.

Whispers.

From the room behind me, more than one person was having a hushed conversation. Later, Nupur would tell me that Judge Loya's wife Sharmila was home. So was their daughter Apurva. They were simply too scared to receive me.

Anuj returned. He offered glasses to Amey and me. I took one, eager to seize my chance.

"Anuj," I asked, as he sat, "What do you do... nowadays?"

The boy looked at his grandfather before looking at the ground. "He is studying," Harkishanji answered.

"What are you studying?" I asked, even though I knew the answer. He didn't respond.

"I heard you were doing engineering," I lied. Nupur told me that he had dropped engineering. "I, too, have an engineering degree."

The boy rose his head and looked in my general direction

for a split second. He looked his grandfather, then at the ground. "He is doing law," Harkishanji answered.

My ONQs were getting demolished. The boy was refusing to being baited into conversation. I refused to lose hope.

"Oh! Which college?" I drew a smile on my face. "I think ILS Law College in Pune is a very reputed one. Isn't it?"

The boy rose his head and looked in my general direction for a split second. He looked his grandfather, then at the ground. "Some private college it is," Harkishanji answered.

This time, I addressed his grandfather. "Why is Anuj not saying anything? I am trying to speak to him."

Harkishan Loya glanced at his grandchild, whose stubborn eyes refused to leave the tiled floor. His voice shook.

"He will not talk," he said. "He does not talk to anybody... not even in the house, not unless it is necessary."

Why, I wanted to ask. The most I could muster was a dumbfounded look. The boy was twenty, damn it. He had his whole life ahead of him. If only he would listen to me, listen to reason...

Harkishanji answered my expressions.

"He does not trust anybody in the world. He doesn't believe in law and order, the political system—even in your media. We... do not have faith in any system."

Amey looked at me for directions, for clues, but I didn't know how to proceed. What could I even say? I could not pretend to understand his woes. My gaze refused to leave the boy's head, hoping, by sheer force of will, that it would convince him to look up from the floor, to look at me and see a friend, to say something worth saying, to strip aside an iota of his fears, his misery...

They both stood up at the same time, indicating that the

meeting was over. "We thank you that you took all the trouble to come here," Harkishanji said, "but, sorry."

I stood up. Amey followed my lead.

"I am doing this investigation in any case," I managed to say. "This is my card. Please let me know if you ever decide to speak."

Anuj sat back, his dead eyes glued to the ground, still as a statue. He breathed heavily, and refused to offer a parting look. I was dead to him.

Harkishanji shook my hand vigorously. He was crying.

Before we knew it, he had closed the door on our faces.

Our footsteps made hollow sounds in clean corridors. Amey was trapped in a trance, and I had no will to comfort him. Journeys and destinations, professional hazards... all my buzzwords of comfort disintegrated to dust when I imagined his face. What unnerved me most was, throughout all this, how perfectly polite and courteous he was. In a parallel world where his father was alive, Anuj would be a well-mannered, sobering presence, mildly curious about his education, occupation or first sip of vodka. In this world, he had not the stomach to betray his countenance for more than five seconds. A life destroyed.

We exited the gate, not sharing a syllable among us. I was confused, I was nauseous. Too many thoughts ran through my head, too many for one person. Amey mutely separated from me and began eyeing rickshaws.

I dialled a number. It answered.

"Beta," I told my daughter, "I... just now. I met a boy of your age. He says he doesn't have trust and faith in any person. In anything. How will such a young boy live without the two most essential ingredients for life?"

I had taken her by surprise. She asked for context, and I recalled the silent vow I made to my family, over chapattis and awkward silences. She couldn't know.

What little context I could offer, I did, but I kept Anuradha, Nupur, Anuj and Brijgopal Loya's names out of it.

"Baba," she said. "You cannot create trust about anybody else. You cannot generate faith about the political or judicial system. Accept that. At the most, you can create trust about your profession. Try for that, if it is possible."

Amey hailed a rickshaw. I entered awkwardly, my eyes blurry in tears. In silence we sat, staring blankly at the sighing breeze, listening to crying birds. My mind flooded with remorse, with helplessness, with raw rage.

"My daughter was right," I said. "I must create trust and faith about my own profession in her generation. How did I even expect Anuj to trust me that easily?"

Amey said nothing. He didn't need to. My eyes were wet, but my voice turned sterner than steel.

"I have decided. I am going to do this investigation even if it costs me my life."

And at that very moment, in that very rickshaw, I told myself that I would head to Nagpur, the home of the RSS, the first chance I found... protocol be damned, Dnyanesh Jathar be damned, THE WEEK be damned.

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7. Harkishanji

BUILDINGS, urban trees, and November's winds of winter blurred past the bored rickshaw. Its rider whistled a tuneless tone. The three-wheeler chugged past jaywalkers, scooters, beggars, and potholes with utmost disinterest, just another cog of the Monday Prabhat Road traffic. I fidgeted with my kada and eyed the highway, impatient for the crimson walls of Hotel Royalty to loom over us. The reliable, daily trudge of Pune City was alien to me. Indeed, whenever the rickshaw stopped at signals, and I caught absent-minded eyes of drivers, I wondered what skeletons, failures, or guilty consciences they had swallowed to the pits of their stomach, so as to act as ordinary members of civil society.

The sun had dulled by the time we reached, turning the red shade of Hotel Royalty into a battered maroon. Amey paid the whistling rider as I hurried inside. We mutely found my room. I shrugged shoes onto the floor and tossed myself on the bed. Amey

scrolled through his phone and pretended to be buried under work. Our minds were occupied with the same thought.

I remembered my promise that only the photographer bore witness to. After calling my daughter, after the long rickshaw ride, it had been further etched into my memory.

Even if it costs me my life…

Jayant Sonawane entered without invite. He cast an eager eye at us. I had the fleeting image of him pacing his room, eyeing his watch, wondering when his hotshot media friends would return.

"Sir! Did he speak? Is your story moving ahead?"

"Forget the story yaar," I snapped, exhausted. "That boy has lost all hope."

Jayant looked at our impassioned faces and immediately understood.

"Did you… speak to Nupur? Or her mother?" he asked instead.

"No. I will."

Awkward silence. Jayant cast concerned eyes at Amey and me, losing his loquacious self. Amey spoke for the first time in ages.

"I can't imagine the fear his father's death created. He did not look up for a minute."

I nodded.

"Any child looks up to his or her father, and his father was a CBI Special Court Judge. His sudden disappearance from life, vacating their official residence in Mumbai, abandoning the engineering course there, looking for a house in Pune…"

I couldn't imagine an adolescent getting excited over new apartments, shiny carpets, or teakwood tables after his old man's

murder. Even after reading his letter, I had seriously undervalued the boy's grief. That, or projected too much of myself on him. The Loyas were well-to-do, but what was wealth compared to a husband's love, a father's love?

I remembered the hushed voices of Sharmila and Apurva Loya, and told Amey and Jayant about the same.

"So how does this go ahead if the family doesn't speak?" Jayant asked.

"I have Dr. Biyani on record," I reminded them.

Right now, her quotes were more priceless than a stone-sized diamond.

"I will investigate, beg, borrow, steal, and find all the medical reports in Nagpur. I must dig those out. I will need hospital staff, post-mortem staff, drivers, Ravi Bhavan staff to speak. I will do all that and approach the family—this time, with evidence."

I had mapped these elements further in the whistling rickshaw. In my head they seemed doable, but when I said them out loud, I sounded like a waffler. If there was one thing the crooks were good at, it was running a tight ship. Entering Nagpur—the home of the RSS—to fish out Real and Demonstrative evidences against the ruling party's President, was akin to cleaning the bloody jaws of a man-eating lion. I was one wrong question, one wrong person away from sounding the alarm from there to New Delhi.

There was also no way Nagpur could be a one-day event. I would have to do reconnaissance, soften my sources, find access routes, and play the waiting game for incriminating documents in a town that deeply loathed me. Even if the stars were on my side, this would definitely take over a week. I also had to brief Dnyanesh, since expense reports and salaries became part of the equation.

"We will stay tonight and leave for Mumbai next morning," I told Amey. He nodded in agreement.

If I had Dnyanesh Jathar's wholehearted support, superb—but if I even caught a whiff of cheap mind games, or if he showed neutrality in the face of fire, I would go regardless. If my half hour of introspection in the indifferent Pune hubbub offered clarity on one thing, it was that I absolutely needed to write this story, not only for the sake of Loya's child, but also my own.

*

"What did you expect?" Dnyanesh Jathar asked ruefully, lighting his Gold Flake on the empty stairwell.

As expected, when we reached at 10:30 a.m., Amey and I were welcomed by an empty office. During the journey, our ideations about hunting the medical reports devolved into morbid jokes about my murder. Laughing at my doom proved preferable to rehashing the depressing events with Anuj Loya. To that topic we paid lip-service. Living it was bad enough, and we knew we had to brief the bureau chief anyway.

A couple of hours from our arrival, Dnyanesh Jathar entered and immediately signalled Amey and me to his den.

Painstakingly, we related to him the entire incident—from the depressing ambience to murmuring voices, from the boy's stubborn eyes to his grandfather's contrite handshake. Dnyanesh sat, his hairy arms tightly folded, not venturing a question. His face revealed naught. Would we meet good cop Dnyanesh or bad cop?

"Let's go outside," he finally said. "I need a smoke."

The office of THE WEEK was on the first floor of a gorgeous century-old wooden structure. This building was near the famous Azad Maidan, and diagonally opposite to New Excelsior Theatre. Through the window of the warm, wooden stairwell, I stared idly at college cliques sauntering inside the

cinema. They must be slightly younger to Anuj.

"I don't know," I answered Dnyanesh's question. "I didn't expect a joyful or cheery boy bubbling with energy. But I definitely expected a young man who wanted justice with rage. Instead, him and Harkishanji presented their situation as if they had lost the world. But in that case, they should have nothing to lose. Right?"

I looked at Amey for approval. He simply shrugged.

I thought of my daughter.

"What would you expect from your child if anything happens to us doing a story like this?" I asked Dnyanesh.

He sipped Saji's chai and took another drag.

"Don't know. Never thought like that." I noted that my bureau chief looked terribly wistful.

"What's the plan ahead for the story?"

"Nagpur."

I told him about the medical records, and how future interviews from family members were contingent on that evidence. At no point was Dnyanesh deterred by what I was suggesting. As he listened intently, his countenance resolved into something solid. After I was finished, he did not even wait for me to ask for permission.

"Perfect, Niranjan," was his seal of approval. "Now I am more inclined to have this story done. We will discuss in the evening."

*

The HDFC ATM near Sterling Cineplex whirred fresh five-hundred- and thousand-rupee bills before beeping its thank-you message. I counted the warm notes before stuffing them in my wallet and exiting the vestibule. Half was for my daughter's hostel

admission, the other half for rent at Cotton Green.

I had spent the entire day on money matters. After the talk with Dnyanesh, hours went into meticulously documenting Pune's tour report and expense statements. THE WEEK only allocated Rs. 400 per day for food, which wasn't enough to pay for the food of sources, drivers and myself. This was unlike my experience at television outlets, which reimbursed me entirely at actuals, as long as I attached necessary bills. But I was not complaining about the drawbacks of print media—not when my bureau chief was determined to see this ship reach its shore. After all our ups and downs, I was glad to have him in my corner.

I gunned the DZire and headed to my room. The first winter month was here, yet Mumbai seemed not to know it. Humid winds made me sweat at each traffic signal.

I needed to reach home, pack and await my destination. It was not entirely certain that this was Nagpur, not since Nupur Biyani had called me before I left office. She had called me after I met Anuj.

"He was very tense. He locked himself in the room for a long time until dinner. I told him that you are extremely trustworthy; that he should have talked to you. He was cold to anything I said."

I told her about my plan to go to Nagpur. She told me to wait.

"Ajoba is going to Gategaon tomorrow," she said. "Aai will speak to him to meet you. Let us hope."

"Oh?"

I did not get the impression that Harkishanji trusted me. If he wanted to talk, he would have done so in Pune. Even so, the fact that Anuradha Biyani was trying to convince him was heart-warming. From deflecting her daughter's words to persuading her

own father, the woman had undergone a transformation.

"Nupur, please let me know so that I can plan for either Nagpur or Gategaon."

I was not bullish, but was glad to have options.

The conversation lingered in my head as I zoomed past Reay Road. For every pothole there was a flyover, and for every speed-breaker there was a green light. The journey home was much the same as the journey of this story, with crests and falls that looked like a sine wave. Rollercoaster rides were the bread and wine of any investigator, and I had learned to enjoy the process, until I met the boy.

Since then, the highs and lows felt much more personal.

Around 9:30 p.m., I parked my car near my building, and found around fifty members gathered in the compound. Some of them were dancing, and others looked like they were in a funeral. Intrigue and fear both gripped me. Was this a crest or a fall?

Pratik Nandgaonkar was not only my neighbour, but also one of my few trusted friends in the locality. He was part of the crowd, but ran toward my car the moment he saw me.

"Modi has demonetized currency notes!" he said, scratching his groomed beard in the darkness.

"What?"

"Modi! He just announced that Rs. 1,000 and Rs. 500 notes will be cancelled from tonight. All invalid."

He explained everything—the diktat, the counterfeit reasoning, the fallout. I could not believe my ears. Amid investigating the biggest story of the decade, I had learned about the biggest story of 2016 through the people I was meant to inform. Life was full of these little ironies.

"The design behind such a decision is either devilish or

stupid," I began. The profound levels of stupidity staggered me. "Never could--"

I paused. I grew cold as ice, suddenly remembering the tens of thousands stowed in my wallet, now as much legal tender as pebbles on the street. How would I pay my bills, my daughter's bills?

My stomach growled in protest.

One problem at a time.

"Let's go somewhere and have dinner," I told Pratik. "We can hopefully pay by card."

Before we left, I cast a sorry glance at my colony members. Almost every family was of the lower middle-class strata. I knew for a fact that a majority were daily wage-labourers. Yet some of them were in euphoria, proclaiming that the rich would suffer, and all black money would be wiped out. Hardships awaited each and every one of us, and these buffoons are overjoyed? They were as good as dancing on their own graves.

That night was eerily dystopic. On the other side of the planet, a lunatic was on the verge of becoming President of the United States. On this side, our lunatic was just starting to sink his claws into the carcass of Indian democracy. I supressed the sudden wish to take my family to Sweden, to France or Finland—wherever was farthest, wherever was saner than here.

*

The world was upside down.

The tsunami tide of demonetization had drowned all illusions of normality. More than a fortnight since Narendra Modi's bombshell, the country struggled to crawl before it could walk. My days began by standing in crowded Harbour line corridors to make good use of my train pass, like the other passengers. Liquid tender was so scarce that I used my decade-old

piggy bank (which, by some miracle, had six thousand rupees) to pay for my daughter's commute and food.

All plans for Nagpur or Gategaon were 'indefinitely postponed', I was told, since there was no cash for official tours. Most contracted distribution boys were fired, since THE WEEK could not pay their daily wage. The office became gloomier than ever. Us correspondents stayed in office, phoned people, and churned desk stories till dusk. Every day, we discussed the implications of demonetization across all social classes, until the topic became as tiring as it was tragic.

Some of my colleagues enjoyed forcibly staying indoors. I loathed it. Investigations must be carried out on ground zero, which was why I felt that I was not doing my job dutifully. Of course, covering the plight of penurious Nashik farmers who sold tomatoes for two rupees p/kg and onions for 30 paisa p/kg, really put into perspective how privileged my problems were.

I was working on this story when Nupur phoned me. The call was brief, but it made me smile for the first time in ages.

For every fall, a crest!

I rushed to Dnyanesh's cabin.

"Judge Loya's father wants to meet me."

The Bureau Chief looked up from his files in surprise.

"Tell me more."

"He wants to meet in Gategaon before 29th November," I recounted the conversation. "30th is the Judge's death anniversary. Most of the Loya family will visit Gategaon then. Harkishan wants to meet when he is alone."

Dnyanesh's bright face immediately became pensive.

"Gategaon…?"

The place was close to Latur, which meant a ten-hour

journey by road. Dnyanesh removed his wallet.

"We do not have the cash. I have two, three hundred rupees on me. Take."

For a second, I had forgotten about this problem.

"I have the same. Maybe we can figure this out. Maybe Amey and I hire a car which accepts card payment. We can hopefully pay for fuel, lodging and food by card. But dhabas on the highway won't accept card. We will need cash-in-hand for snacks and tea…"

The numbers, we realized, were adding up frightfully quickly. I stared at Dnyanesh, dumbfounded and helpless. I am so near and so far.

"Let me speak with our G.M.," he told me.

Shrikumar Menon was the Malayala Manorama's General Manager for Distribution, Marketing and Sales. I had a great rapport with him, but how much did rapports matter when Modi's economy had become the survival of the fittest?

I myself turned to Amey, hoping that a problem shared was a problem halved. It wasn't. For hours, he used his excellent contacts and network to minimize travel cost. For transport, the best he could muster was a tourist vehicle. The owner said he would drive it himself. He accepted payment by debit card, but would pull the plug if he did not get a cash advance of Rs. 2,500.

All of us put together had less than a thousand bucks.

"This is impossible," I thought to myself. Today was already 24th November. I had half a week to put together thousands in cash, in a country where citizens were fainting while standing in ATM queues. I remembered my grand claim to Jayant that I would beg, borrow or steal to reach the finish line of this story.

Where can I even beg from?

Almost on cue, Dnyanesh Jathar exited his den, beaming like Vishnu the Preserver.

"Shrikumar sir has agreed to give ten thousand advance," he said. "Go, run, get it before it disappears!"

I rode my bike like the wind. I ignored the metaphorical potholes, speed-breakers and instead made them a blur, hurtling to Shrikumar sir's office at Lower Parel. Mr. Menon was mandated to keep a measly sum of Rs. 20,000 cash for an entire week.

That afternoon, he gave me half his reserves.

As the Lower Parel staff stood in their cubicles and looked at me with accursed eyes, I avoided their gaze and nervously patted my bag, checking that the bundle was safely stowed. That day, the gratitude I felt for Shrikumar Menon and Dnyanesh Jathar was indescribable.

However fascist a government gets, they cannot kill the universal human impulse for fellowship.

*

The Tavera lumbered past police barricades and broken roads, sending sharp stabs up my spine.

After the Mumbai-Pune expressway, the paved path disintegrated like rocks becoming dust. The unbearable sun made us draw up our windows, which meant the leftovers of Amey's lunchbox flung a stale stench in the air-conditioned car.

Our driver was a short, medium-built bloke in his thirties. For obvious reasons, we could not discuss the story around him, which meant we were mostly mum. Even my dear photojournalist, usually chatty, reinforced this bored silence.

For us, to traverse the length of Mumbai to Gategaon in one day would be like summiting the Everest with one arm—it was possible, but the strain was both enormous and unnecessary.

The Tembhurni-Osmanabad road itself took him five hours to cross, despite being 150 kilometres. Local elections were ongoing. Policemen periodically opened our luggage to check if we were carrying cash to influence voters. No sir, only off to expose Modi's right-hand man, I thought, chuckle spread from ear to ear.

It was at Osmanabad that we planned to retire for the night. On the way, I phoned my friend Raj Kulkarni and asked him to book us a hotel. The plan was to leave for Gategaon the following morning, since it was only forty kilometres from the hotel.

"Who is Raj, anyway?" Amey finally asked, as night fell, and we neared our quarry.

"Brilliant practicing advocate," I told him. "Extremely well-read with deep understanding of socio-political issues. I'm going to let him in on my investigation, because I want to discuss a few legal aspects. Actually, I'm about to meet him after a long time..."

"Mmm." Amey sounded like he had asked to pass the time.

We reached Osmanabad a little after 10 p.m. Raj told us to come to some restaurant outside town, since he had already arranged dinner there. That night, we discussed Judge Loya's murder at length before he dropped us to the hotel, where I afforded my poor back some rest.

All this while, Amey looked a tad impatient. I couldn't blame him for his boredom, but interviewing cabinet ministers and shady whistle-blowers was only one percent of my job. The other ninety-nine percent was travelling to forgotten lands and waiting entire evenings for one quote, often fruitlessly.

Having said that, I wondered how fruitful my meeting with Harkishanji would be. The man seemed a venerable patriarch, a man of honour. He may have guessed that Amey and I had moved

heaven and hell to come to Gategaon. Unlike Dr. Biyani, I did not think he would need coaxing. But how much would he trust me? What new information did he offer? And would he speak on camera?

*

Gategaon was easy to miss. It required taking a left from the Osmanabad-Latur highway onto a narrow path, on which our driver rode till we reached an arched kamani gate. We passed gaping children, shuttered stores, dry rocks, lonesome trees and dilapidated homes which were separated by parched lands. Gategaon cut a barren, forlorn figure in the heart of rural Marathwada.

This was where Judge Loya's body was sent, I remembered, feeling a chill in the arid heat.

The lonesome village only had a few hundred houses, which was why Harkishanji's one-storied place was easy to find. For an ancestral home, it was modest. Even though it looked old, the place was recently plastered. It rested on a small plinth, and the main door was wide open. As our driver parked the car, I saw an old man sitting inside. By the time Amey and I reached the plinth, he was on the doorstep.

"Please come inside."

Even though Harkishanji was eighty-five years old, he was stout and stood with a straight chest posture. Years of farm labour had made him physically strong and given him a tanned skin. His deep voice reflected his experience of life.

Harkishanji invited us to sit on a mat.

"I want justice," he said without prelude. "Anuradha told me that she has talked to you, and she trusts you. But how do you know Nupur?"

Before I could answer, Harkishanji received a call. As he spoke, I looked around. While the home was renovated from the outside, it retained its rural character indoors. There was no furniture in the house—just a few farming tools and a small pump. Wooden columns and beams separated the rooms. On the green wall, there hung a garlanded mid-size photo frame of (I realized, with a jolt) Brijgopal Loya.

"I called them for tea," Harkishanji told the caller.

I looked at him, alert.

They're asking about us.

"Okay. Okay. Understood."

He hung up.

"Local police. They asked whose car was parked outside my house. I said someone was asking for an address, but was an acquaintance. So I invited them in for tea." He paused. "Every time anyone visits me, the local police inquire."

"You should have told him to come and check," I replied, angered. "I would have given them a befitting reply!"

Amey gave me a mute look. I understood, and asked for water. Harkishanji went inside. I took a deep breath. Amey was right; I needed to have a cooler head. It was just shocking to learn that even an old man was under surveillance, and a sobering reminder that I could not underestimate the enemy.

Harkishanji returned with two glasses. Even when he sat, his posture was upright, unlike many youngsters who bent their backs while relaxing.

"I know Nupur's schoolmate, Jayant," I answered his parent question. "He introduced me to her. Subsequently, Dr. Anuradha spoke to me."

"Okay," he said. "I will trust you if my daughter does. I

have lived a long life. I am not scared. I am... worried for all my grandchildren."

And Harkishan Loya began to cry.

"I lost my Brij to those monsters!" he said. "We miss him every moment. My wife is shattered. We don't want to lose anyone now!" He cried for some time. He looked at me. "Beta, Brij was taller. But you look like him. You, give us justice. Not a single journalist reached out to us when he died! We thought you people dug out so many scams and breaking news!"

Amey tried to remove his camera. "Don't record anything," Harkishanji told him. "I want to vent out all my pain and doubts first."

He started speaking. On that devastating day, he said that he was accompanying his grandson in a hospital in Latur. The grandson was admitted for treatment. His daughter, Sarita, was in Latur city. At 5:10 a.m., she received a call from Vijaykumar Barde, a Nagpur local judge. Judge Barde said that Brijgopal had passed away due to cardiac arrest. He asked them to come to Nagpur. Sarita rushed to inform and pick up Harkishanji from the hospital.

Suddenly, around 6 a.m., a man named Ishwar Baheti came to the same hospital. He claimed to be a friend of Judge Loya's, and said that he was coordinating with everyone in Nagpur throughout the night. He told the Loya family that there was no need to go to Nagpur. The post-mortem was already over, he said, and Brij's body would be sent to Gategaon.

"We didn't suspect anything at the time," Harkishanji said. "But... who gave him the numbers of Brijgopal's five sisters? Who gave Ishwar Baheti's number to the Nagpur judges? Why was he asked to contact us? Why not us instead of this Baheti? How did Baheti know that we were at that particular hospital in Latur? Why

was Brijgopal's cell phone, wallet and watch handed over to Baheti instead of us? Why was everything in his phone deleted? Who did that?"

He started crying again. "All such questions haunt us every moment we live."

This time, he was bawling like a baby. I held his hand and started patting it, not knowing what to say. A crying old man is an unnatural sight, like a wilted orchard or a burning orphanage. I was reminded of my own father, who was bedridden at the time.

"Promise me that you will bring this to light," he said, between sobs. "Swear on God."

"I won't cheat you by swearing on God. I'm an atheist," I said. "But I swear on my daughter that I will do everything. I am actually surprised that you still believe in God, after your noble-hearted, honest son got killed."

He stared at me with red eyes. "No! No!" he said. "Don't swear on your daughter! I trust you."

He hugged me and started sobbing again. It was harrowing.

"Speak out your mind," I told him, hoping I was helping. "You will feel much better once you vent out everything that is steaming inside your heart."

He broke the hug.

"I will. I want to. Just don't record now."

In total, we spoke for nearly four hours. Harkishanji said that Anuradha alone demanded a second post-mortem, but the family was opposed to it. He reiterated that his son's personal effects were handed over by Baheti, not the police. This was three days after his son died. Through a family friend, he also tried to retrieve Brijgopal's call data records. They realized that, beyond a

year, only the police department could order to retrieve these records.

The most important part was when Harkishanji briefly went to his wada (an old house made of mud and wood), and returned with a plastic bag. It contained the unwashed clothes Judge Loya wore the night he was killed. The shirt was still soaked in dried blood from the left shoulder to the waist.

Proof, cold proof staring in my face. I immediately asked him if I could take it with me.

"No," he replied. "Anuj often likes to hold them."

Before we left, I asked him if we could take a picture of Judge Loya's photo-frame. "Take," he said. "You can take my photograph also."

However, when I asked him if he would speak on camera, he seemed reluctant.

"I am tired, and I do not want to endanger my grandchildren," he repeated. "Have you gathered any evidence?"

I told him about the medical records.

"I have very good sources in Nagpur, and I know ways to get those from them."

However, it seemed Harkishanji did not want to speak without evidence, and I had no heart to insist. Besides, if push came to shove, my scribbled notes were also legally admissible.

On the plinth, Harkishan Loya held my hands. His black eyes bore into mine.

"Beta, take care of yourself. These people are devils. If they can kill a judge, everyone is in danger."

"Nothing will happen to me until I break the story," I reassured him with a smile. "Don't worry. I am capable of handling my safety."

When Harkishan Loya waved us goodbye, all my thoughts were on his helpless family. I did not realize how soon my assurances would be put to test.

Around ten minutes later, as dusk approached and our driver pulled up on the Latur-Osmanabad highway, I received a call from a friend in the Intelligence Bureau. I knew him as a useful colleague, but not much more. I certainly wasn't expecting a call from him.

"What are you doing in Latur?" he demanded straightaway.

"Who told you that?"

"No one has to tell us."

He had paused, awaiting an answer.

"I am here for stories on demonetization... impact on rural economy."

He laughed at my lie.

"I know why you are there. Meet me without fail once you return."

He hung up. As my puzzled photojournalist looked at me, Harkishanji's final words rung in my ears like ominous echoes.

"Boss," I told him, careful that our driver was out of earshot, "my phone must be tapped."

*

Raj Kulkarni was a thin, square-spectacled lawyer in Osmanabad's district sessions court. He was also a voracious reader, a Nehruvian and an engaging conversationalist. It had been a year since we last met, but that evening, we picked up where we left off. Amey and I went to a restaurant and ate mutton with him, two local journalists and a doctor. Raj also helped arrange meetings with a few lawyers who personally knew Judge Loya.

The next morning, Raj graciously invited us for breakfast, since our hotel did not have a kitchen. He was good enough company to almost make me forget my eerie phone call with the senior officer.

Almost.

I was sharply reminded when my phone battery began draining quickly.

"Is everything alright?" my host asked me, when no one was around.

"My phone battery is draining very fast. I suspect it's being tapped."

He looked thoughtful. "Don't worry. You are not involved in anything illegal. Just be careful while talking to others, and switch off your phone whenever you are having a confidential meeting."

Kulkarni's advice cooled my paranoia, although he did not dispel it. I kept recalling how local police phoned Harkishanji the moment I had stepped foot in his home. They certainly had eyes on me now, if they hadn't before. I had blown my cover before heading to Nagpur.

It was perhaps out of this anxiety that I argued with the hotel cashier during check out. At the eleventh hour, he had told us that they only accepted cash. We did not have enough on hand. Raj, who knew the owner, intervened on our behalf, and convinced the cashier to accept cheque. It was nearly 1 p.m. by the time we left the hotel. I pitied the staff only in hindsight, because in the moment I was raging. Demonetization has made demons of us all.

We decided to take a better route to Pune, via Solapur. The driver drove, Amey snored and I fidgeted with my tapped phone. Two Qualis cars were honking behind us like crows even after we

left Osmanabad. I became paranoid enough to think that they were tailing us. For my peace of mind, I told the driver to let them go ahead if they kept honking.

The plan was to halt for lunch after crossing Solapur. However, despite the good road, heavy traffic was slowing us down. There was some ongoing work at the nearby Ujani dam, and several water tankers were crowding the highway.

As we slowed, so did the silver Qualis.

It occurred to me that Toyota had stopped production of the car in the mid-2000s. Only policemen, CID officers, etc. were associated with Qualis and Bolero cars. Startled, I immediately profiled the two vehicles. Four men in each car, eight in all. The lads looked like ruffians for sure. They caught my eye and gave me strange looks.

Our driver caught my nonverbal exchange, and started to look worried. He knew nothing, but I think he had pieced together that we were pursuing a dangerous story. I heard the peaceful snores of Amey, and saw a layer of sweat forming on the driver's forehead.

These men are in the soup because of me. They are my responsibility.

Figuratively and literally, it was time to take the wheel.

I handed the driver a bottle of water. "Don't worry," I smiled. "We'll switch seats the moment we reach the next toll post. Let me drive for some time."

The driver nodded silently. I casually removed a stainless-steel expandable baton stick from my backpack, hoping the gundas would see it. In my profession, it was wise to prepare even for the end of the world.

We approached the toll gate and joined the queue of cars. Some road-widening work was ongoing, which was causing

another jam. I saw the under-construction track to my left. Thanks to the traffic, the Qualis was around twenty cars behind. We had an advantage.

My stomach began to churn. I ignored it.

"Ready?" I asked the driver. He silently nodded again.

He pulled the handbrake, and we switched seats within the minute. I waited for a gap to be created between our car and the one ahead. I slowly moved the Tavera forward, and so did the two Qualis cars. It was a feint, for I suddenly pulled to the left, onto the road under construction. They couldn't follow suit.

We were at the toll gate. I showed them my PRESS card and paid the toll. The moment the rail opened, I drove full throttle until we reached the highway. The silver cars were now nowhere in sight.

"I am used to this kind of driving," I told the flabbergasted driver, as Amey snored like a bulldog.

We soon crossed Solapur, and found a dhaba for lunch. I discreetly parked the Tavera under a shade and woke up my photojournalist. I wanted to err on the side of safety, so we wolfed down our lunches and bought some of Solapur's famous groundnut chatni before we left.

The toll post that followed was slower than a snail. It took us half an hour to cross. Every wasted minute felt longer than a week. I kept checking my rear-view, wondering if I would see the Qualis cars looming behind me. The driver did the same. Nothing.

We paid our toll without incident, caught the highway, and I immediately saw the two cars standing on the roadside.

They were waiting for us. Two of the goons were on the road. The moment they saw our Tavera, they rushed into their cars. Soon enough, both Qualis cars were behind us, honking like

madmen on the national highway.

This is happening. This is real.

I moved the car to the extreme left side of the highway. One Qualis came parallel to us, and the two guys on the window side began abusing us. One of them was waving a hockey stick. My palms felt wet against the wheel.

Amey, who did not know what was going on until then, began to abuse them back. I remembered that he was a newly married man.

"Don't worry yaar," I told him cheerfully. "Let me handle this." I turned to the driver. "Where's your jack and tommy? Is it in the boot?"

He nodded.

"Okay," I told him. "I will be stopping soon. Get down, take out the tommy and sit back inside."

He looked at me as if I was a crazy person.

"Trust me!" I added, not entirely trusting myself.

The Tavera stopped. So did the Toyotas.

I opened the boot and exited with my baton, while the driver faithfully pulled out his large, iron tommy. The eight men stared at it from inside their cars. I waved my baton, speaking to the thugs in the only language they understood. We strolled back inside our car. This time, the silver cars followed us from a longer distance.

They had gotten the message. They were eight and we were three, but if they were prepared for blood, so were we. It turned out that they weren't. I was not surprised.

Show a fascist that you have no fear, and they slink back inside their racist holes like rabbits.

The goons had still not given up the ghost, but after that

shift in power dynamic, we were much more confident. The driver relaxed. We filled our gas tank and paid by card. Amey booked a room at Hotel Royalty over the phone. After we crossed Indapur, the gundas came close again, but by now I had a trick up my sleeve. I casually kept my right hand outside the window, baton in hand. If the car came close, I was ready to strike it. To be entirely safe, I also posted on my Facebook that two unknown vehicles were chasing us from Osmanabad to Pune.

Amey, bless him, was completely oblivious to this development, and was passionately talking to us about the impact of demonetization on the rural economy. All three cars were flexing for a fight, but I realized that it was Amey's empathy, our empathy, that was the difference between us and the gundas; that made us the good guys.

By the time we reached Hadapsar, Pune, the two cars were long overtaken. Amey even stopped at a bakery for ten minutes. As he was heading back to the Tavera, the two Qualis cars passed us.

Amey got in. "They were looking right at me, but went ahead."

The last time we saw the two cars was while entering Pune cantonment, where they were waiting on the roadside. This time, I deliberately slowed the Tavera, threw them a scornful look and disappeared into a gully. I knew the shortcuts and small lanes of Pune better than the back of my hand, and lost the trail within minutes.

We pulled up at the parking lot of Hotel Royalty in the dead of the night, alone and unfollowed. I smiled at my friends, and my sweaty face shone in the moonlight.

I tried not to show them that I had never faced anything like this as an Indian journalist.

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8. Nagpur

AFTER the merciful new morning, after the driver dropped us at Dadar before speeding away, after Amey Mansabdar and I washed our worries at Cotton Green, after we reached the monotonous, comfortable walls of office and waited for the bureau chief—after all this, I sat, breathed, and thanked my luminous, lucky stars.

"If they can kill a judge, everyone is in danger."

I carefully typed out the written notes at Gategaon while absent-mindedly glancing at Amey, who was busy editing and captioning the photographs. A married man. I had put his safety at stake. One slip-up in a forgotten Maharashtrian village was enough for eight thugs to tail us for over 250 kilometres.

My photojournalist and I were nearly finished when Dnyanesh Jathar arrived. We entered his office and shut the door behind us.

"Could you get him on record?" was his first question.

"No. All I have are notes. He didn't want us to record video until I had evidence. But it was a very emotional outburst. Nearly four hours. He says he is worried for his grandchildren."

"That's fair enough. Any new information?"

I skimmed through my diary and told him the highlights.

"He showed me the shirt and the jeans Judge Loya wore on the night of his death. His clothes had dried blood on it. He also tried to find his son's call and text records, but the service provider refused. He spoke to a few lawyer friends with whom his son confided his fears and future-plans. Judge Loya also told his father that he planned for a transfer or voluntary retirement. This corroborates what Dr. Biyani told me at Latur."

Amey showed the bureau chief what pictures he could click. Dnyanesh looked pleased.

"Sir, there's nothing else left now. Harkishanji needs evidence. As does this story. Amey and I need to plan the Nagpur tour. We probably won't find everything in one visit, but at least we can establish contacts. The process to dig out medical reports will start. But we need to do this as soon as possible."

"Why?"

I told him about my phone being tapped and the gundas who followed us from Osmanabad to Pune. Despite the details, the bureau chief maintained his impassioned demeanour.

"If you want... plan for Nagpur. But be extremely cautious. For now, submit your Latur and Osmanabad expense statements. I will check when some advance is available. But what will you do about the surveillance?"

"Let's see," I replied. "I know a guy."

*

I stood near the Press Club of Mumbai, awaiting the acquaintance while keeping eyes for suspicious passers-by.

The last three days had been packed. Firstly, there was preparing the expense statements for Latur and Osmanabad. After that, I updated Nupur and Anuradha Biyani on meeting Harkishanji. The next day, I headed to Dadar to pick up my wife, who had arrived from Nashik by the evening bus. We dropped her bag at Cotton Green and unwound over dinner.

Throughout these days, I revised the mind-maps and flow-charts to improve the Nagpur action plan. Thinking of necessary precautions, anticipating problems, and imagining practical ways to bypass them was an excellent mental exercise. Here, however, lack of attention would lead to peril.

I was, after all, headed to a city where the Sangh had its home, to retrieve documents which would retard its political arm.

The first step was to introduce myself to G.M.C.'s post-graduation medical students at Nagpur. I called them, and after giving the reference of Vaibhav Chhaya, they became friendlier. I informed them about the plan to visit Nagpur in a couple of days, using cover of the Freeship story. They agreed.

The second step was to understand which documents I was looking for. I spoke to a lawyer friend about legal procedures when a person dies outside the hospital.

"An MLC, or medico-legal case, is filed by hospitals in case of Death on Arrival, D.O.A. There is also Inquest panchanama, post-mortem report, histopathology, and forensic reports."

I knew these terms before, but didn't understand the medical contexts. I thanked the lawyer, hung up, and asked Swagata Yadavar to explain like I was five.

"It's a long procedure," she said. "If a death happens not in the hospital or doctor's presence, then the hospital prepares MLC. Since Loya's death allegedly happened in a rickshaw, there must be an MLC record. After this, an Inquest panchanama happens in

front of an Executive Magistrate. The Inquest mentions how the body looks like from the outside."

"From the outside?"

"For example: is the body blackened? Are there visible injuries? What objects were found in his pockets? This is all noted."

"Alright. What then?"

"Immediately afterwards, the closest relative must be informed. Their consent and signature are required to begin a post-mortem."

"When the family were informed about Loya's death," I recalled, "they were told that post-mortem was already conducted."

"Hmm. Investigate that. Anyway, post-mortem happens right after the Inquest. A forensic recommendation report is also prepared in this time. After this, the body's viscera (internal) organ samples are sent to a pathology lab and forensic lab. Histopathology report is made in the pathology lab, and forensic report is made in the forensic lab. If Judge Loya was poisoned, these reports will tell you the exact poison, the time administered, the quantity, the condition of the body, etc. That's it."

A horn rung, rudely interrupting my reveries. A familiar looking Maruti Gypsy was approaching me. Behind the driver, I saw my Intelligence Bureau officer friend.

I sat. As we made genial greetings, the car moved.

"When is your tour to Nagpur?"

I did not ask how he knew.

"Tomorrow. I'll drop my wife to Dadar bus stop in the afternoon, then take an 8 p.m. train from C.S.T."

Soon enough, the Gypsy stopped smartly in front of a café. While the driver waited in the car, I got down along with my

colleague.

Kyani and Co. is one of Mumbai's most famous Irani cafes, till the point that its waiters have abandoned all facades of friendliness. They know that, despite their nonchalance and hostility, the place will always be chock-full of suit-men, tourists, college kids and the like. The fact that Kyani was also a public hotspot made this an ideal place to share secrets.

Two coffees, we told a grumpy waiter, who left as soon as he begrudgingly arrived.

"You are doing adventures now," the officer said vaguely. "But remember that some adventures are extremely risky."

"I'm not doing any adventures. This is not mountain-climbing. And risks are a professional hazard I can't run from."

"Look. I asked you to meet me because I take you as my friend. So, you should know. You are calling people who are under surveillance. That's how you have also come under surveillance."

He was making me nervous.

"You know me well. You know I'm going to do this story."

He grinned. "Yes."

"Help me."

The officer also grinned at the waiter who clattered our saucers on the table. When he was out of earshot, the smile evaporated like the wisps of our coffees.

"Your travel plans: never mention them on the phone. Use different modes of transport at different timings. Don't follow any fixed routes. Eat at different places every day. Make copies of your important documents at several places. Change your email's password every week. Do you understand? Don't follow any predictable patterns. And don't panic after hearing these precautions. Stay alert."

"I am alert," I said, defensively. "I'm working on a serious

issue. But I cannot remain over-cautious."

The officer stood up.

"You cannot be over-cautious enough. The issue you are working on is very serious and important. My best wishes to you. I repeat: stay alert."

He left.

The waiter took his place with a bill. By the time I paid and left the café, the officer was waving at me from the front seat of the Gypsy.

*

Stars lit up the black sky.

Maharashtra's countryside was gorgeous during evenings, but pitch-black by night. The train was moving at full throttle. After dinner, Amey's heavy eyes were opening and drooping, as the Duronto's cradle-like movements lulled him to sleep.

I myself was wide awake, glued to the phone.

My wife was supposed to have reached Nashik three hours ago, but her phone was ringing out. She was probably busy with dinner, yet I was worried. The silver cars, the gundas with hockey sticks and the Intelligence Bureau officer's warnings were all wedged in my head.

As Amey dozed, I called her twice. No response.

I waited a while, then called my daughter.

"Did you speak to aai after she left from Mumbai?" I asked, keeping out the concern from my voice.

"No. Let me try calling her."

Amey was wide awake by the time I hung up.

"Did you tell anyone about the purpose of our trip? Over phone?"

"No. Wait. I spoke to my neighbour. Pratik. Maybe I told

him?"

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know..."

My daughter called. "Aai's phone is switched off."

A nasty thought entered my mind: Sohrabuddin Sheikh and Kausarbi were abducted from a public bus. Maybe some thugs shadowed us when I dropped her to the Dadar bus stop. Maybe they guessed who she was, or maybe they had already done their homework. I knew for a fact that the route from Mumbai to Nashik was often secluded.

Not only was this doable, but there was also a track record of it.

Of course, it was perfectly possible that my wife's phone had switched off and she was cooking safely at home. But I had to be sure. Her bus was scheduled to reach Nashik around 5 p.m., and it was now eleven in the night. I called my elder sister to find out whether the 1 p.m. bus from Dadar had reached its destination.

Five minutes later, she called me back.

It hadn't.

I was almost in tears.

"We're ascending the Igatpuri ghats," I told Amey. "This is an express—it won't stop anywhere until Nagpur. I'll pull the chain when we reach Igatpuri and go to Nashik by road. Amey, wait for me in Nagpur."

"I won't leave you alone," he said instinctively. "I'm coming with you."

Somehow, when the train reached Igatpuri, it slowed of its own accord. A few workmen were refilling water. This was my chance.

I grabbed my bags, and Amey followed suit. We left the train. My phone rang.

It was her.

She said that her phone was on silent at the beginning. She said that her battery drained while the bus was caught in traffic at Mankhurd. She said that the bus took two and a half hours to navigate through Thane, only to be caught in another jam at the ghats.

I was only half-listening. As Amey patted me on the back and tossed our bags inside the Duronto, I wept—silently enough for her not to hear.

*

Nagpur—the unofficial centre-post of India. A town so rugged in terrain that the geography had nurtured her natives. This parched, drought-prone place was once capital to British India's Central Provinces. Today, it survived on the eastern precipice of Maharashtra, largely forgotten in favour of Konkan cities and hill-stations. How few cared for Nagpur even showed in the inferiority complexes of her aggressive minorities. Indeed, the city only agreed to be part of the state after it was guaranteed one assembly session which focused on Vidarbha's issues.

Over the years, as I covered these winter sessions, I learned to love this town. There was fondness in the supercilious, blue-collared workers, the Saoji mutton, the winter weather. However, as Amey and I sat in the rickshaw which chugged us to our first destination, it was not nostalgia that tightened my heart—only paranoia.

We had checked into a hotel near Yashwant Stadium. There, I called the G.M.C.'s students and fixed an afternoon appointment with one person. We headed to the hospital soon after, keeping a casual lookout for suspicious cars and bikes. Thankfully, the roads were as indifferent as ever.

The red-and-white walls of Government Medical College soon approached. The rickshaw took us inside the 196-acre

complex without incident, and dropped us outside a building.

We waited. Our contact came soon enough. Tall, wheatish, medium-built. He gave us a pleasant smile, we made formal introductions, and he led us inside the building, which smelt like a bottle of sanitizer.

"As you know," I began, "we are here to report case-studies of Scheduled Caste post-graduation students who are not receiving their Freeship money."

"Yes. I am one of those. I'll introduce you to other students if you are going to be here for more days. Some of us are facing a tough time due to this issue."

He began talking. I took notes of his family and financial background. Soon after, we went to the canteen where, as expected, he became more relaxed. I asked him about life at G.M.C.

"It's tough. We never have extra money to spend on leisure. Many of my friends live with one pair of jeans and a few T-shirts. Some of us had plans to save our Freeship money and help our parents back home. Now, we take part-time jobs just to sustain here."

We chatted until it was time for him to leave.

"I have to go for my next sessions. My friends and I will mostly be free on Sunday. I will introduce you then."

As we sat in a rickshaw that took us back to our hotels, Amey perused through the photos he took of G.M.C.'s post-mortem room.

"Sir, you never mentioned Judge Loya. When will you ask about the post-mortem?"

"Not right now. We need to invest time here. The boy was hesitant to even divulge his family's financial situation. He and his friends will only open up once they realize that we are not here merely for reporting, but because we sympathize."

In addition, this student and his friends were from the 2015-16 batch. If they knew anything about Loya's death, it would be hearsay. Their seniors from the 2014-15 batch were whom I needed to connect with. Of course, it wouldn't be easy. Students tended to feel pressurized by the establishment whenever they had to speak against it.

Unlike their elders, the youth were burdened by problems of the future.

*

Mr. K was a well-connected socialite with his own business and contacts in Nagpur. He was also a dear friend.

That afternoon, in our hotel room, K listened intently as Amey and I spoke for hours, telling him about the true purpose of our Nagpur visit.

"Bhau," he said. "I know somebody in the Public Works Department. They look after the regular maintenance of Ravi Bhavan. Let me give him a call."

Ten minutes later, K hung up his phone. The PWD officer had agreed to meet us the next morning.

"Excellent," I said. "Do you know someone in the G.M.C. and police department? I need their help to access medical records."

"Hmm." He sounded less sure. "Give me some time."

There was not much else K could help with, so Amey and I headed back to G.M.C. The student we had met had called us to meet more people. In the dwindling canteen crowd, his three friends told us about their struggles.

One of them was working part-time in Nagpur to support his own education. His father, a bus conductor, could not provide for him and his two younger siblings. They were relying on the Freeship money until the government stole their safety net. The other two students had borrowed from village moneylenders, who

now had them leashed on exorbitant monthly interests. They could not even afford their mess bills.

It was a sobering chat. We offered advice wherever appropriate, but otherwise listened patiently. We were talking to Dalits. Their community had been humiliated, scorned, and persecuted by their own neighbours for thousands of years.

Their trust was always needed to be earned.

*

The next day began at the PWD office, where Mr. K assured me that his contact was trustworthy.

"The issue my friends are working on," K told the officer, while gesturing at us, "is extremely sensitive and confidential."

"What is it?"

"Do you know anything about a mysterious death, or murder, in Ravi Bhavan? This must be around November or December 2014."

"Mysterious? Murder? I haven't heard anything like this. But we have an engineer permanently deputed to look after the daily maintenance of the Bhavan and some government quarters. I can ask him."

The PWD officer dialled a number. As his expression grew more and more sombre, mine grew more and more hopeful.

"One guy has heard something fishy from a Bhavan worker," he said. "'Bada kaand ho gaya... murder hi hoga.' He doesn't remember the date, but said he would find out more."

A big scandal has happened... it must be murder.

I chipped in. "The person who died was a CBI Special Court Judge. He was in Nagpur for a wedding ceremony. Perhaps that will narrow down his search."

"Let me find out. PWD gets our booking either from the Court's Protocol Officer, or from the Law and Judiciary

Department. I will need some time, as this is over a year now. I'll need a day or two to even find out which suite he was staying in."

Even so, the fact that a staff member inside Ravi Bhavan had doubts over Judge Loya's death was an encouraging sign. It substantiated nothing, but was another gentle nudge to push on.

Soon after, K dropped us to G.M.C., where we had another appointment with MD students. Amey was held up for a bit, since Dnyanesh was bothering him with questions.

"We started working here just for a day, and he's already asking about return dates! I told him to call you."

There was no time to vent about this. The students were already waiting for us near the porch. This time, there was one more addition to the four lads. As always, I noted down family backgrounds, part-time jobs, monthly requirements, loan statuses, etc. This time, I asked them about Coronary Artery Insufficiency and Histopathology reports. They told me which internal organ tissues were needed for forensic and pathology analyses.

I eventually popped the question.

"Listen, are you in touch with your seniors? I'm looking for alumni who received Freeship money for the first year but not in the second year, when the government changed in May 2014."

"Of course. A few of them are practising in Nagpur right now. You want to meet them?"

"I'd love to."

When the students took us around the hospital, and we passed the post-mortem room, I confirmed another conjecture.

"I can't imagine how you guys do post-mortem. I heard you also video it?"

"We do," one of the students said. "It's legally mandatory in Maharashtra. But the experience is awful. Some of the staff can't do it without the high of alcohol. Many from the post-mortem

department become drunkards. It's hard to stay sane while cutting open dead bodies and determining causes of death. With age, it becomes harder."

Amey and I left for lunch.

"So far, I think nobody is following us," I told him. "Things are also going according to flow-charts. We're likely to get a breakthrough once the students meet their seniors on next Sunday. But that's four days away. And we don't know how long it will take to win their trust. We need to move things along. While our student friends get in touch with their seniors, let's push K to find contacts in Ravi Bhavan and the police."

Once again, we called K to the hotel. He arrived exactly on time.

"I'll try," he said, "but frankly, you can't expect everything to happen in one visit. You want to unearth something which everyone wants to hide. Your seniors should understand this. Why don't you return to Mumbai tomorrow and come back the next weekend?"

"Damn it. I'm not sure if Dnyanesh will allow me another Nagpur tour within a week."

K smiled. "Your boss doesn't think very logically, does he?"

*

The one-storied, white-walled Ravi Bhavan fancily flung the sun's rays into the morning air. This building was only one of several cottages, MLA hostels, lawns, etc. that occupied around a hundred acres. As the air carried chilly waves, the grass on the Bhavan's huge lawn danced with it.

Amey and I were here to click photographs. We had booked a Duronto back to Mumbai that evening, but did not want the morning to go to waste. After Ravi Bhavan, the plan was also to click pictures of Dande Hospital—where Loya was first allegedly taken—and Meditrina Hospital, where the judge was declared

dead on arrival. Fortunately, since the Bhavan was never devoid of IAS/IPS officers, prominent judges or assembly members, clicking pictures was not unusual. At my request, Amey even clicked photos of cottages around the government's guest house.

Some staff members looked at us like we were tourists. They have no idea what we're up to.

Someone came from the reception area. "Where are you from?" he smiled at Amey. "What pictures are you taking?"

"We're from THE WEEK magazine," I smiled back. "Mumbai office. We are taking pictures of the premises, suites, etc. There are so many visitors here. Don't you have an ambulance permanently deployed?"

Tactless.

The staff member instantly became alert. I could have chewed my own tongue for my thoughtlessness.

"Yes, we do have one. But why are you asking about ambulances? You know what… why don't you meet our manager? Come. I will introduce you."

Amey and I entered, having no choice. The staff member took us to the ground-floor reception, after climbing a couple of steps to the main porch. The manager was standing near the reception area.

"They are from Mumbai," he told the manager. "English newspaper called Daily Week."

"THE WEEK," I corrected. "English magazine of the Manorama Group."

"Ah! I've heard of that. We used to read your annual Manorama Yearbook for our competitive exams."

"Sir," our escort interrupted, "they were taking pictures. This person asked if we have any ambulance permanently deployed."

"Is that so? What information do you need? I'll share it."

From tactless, I became reckless.

"I heard that one judge died in Ravi Bhavan in the night, and there was no ambulance here. He was taken to hospital by rickshaw in the middle of the night?"

It was the manager's turn to look tense and alert.

"I have not heard this," he mumbled. "He was staying here? But rickshaws are not available even during the day. Who will get it at night?"

"He stayed here with two judges. 30th November and 1st December, 2014," I said, doubling down. The manager's twitchiness was egging me on. "Can we see your register?" I dared. "There must be a record of their stay."

The manager leaned back on the reception counter and looked around vaguely. "It must be in the old entry registers. I'll have to search for it. Not possible today."

"Okay. I will come again. Please find out for me."

Before we left, the manager asked for my card. I could not refuse.

Ten minutes later, we found a rickshaw.

"Now everyone in Nagpur will know that we are doing this story," Amey said. "It was too early to alert them."

He spoke respectfully, but sounded miffed. As my heart slowed, my head caught up. Amey was right: I had stupidly invited the situation. To recuse myself, when we went to Meditrina and Dande, I sat in the rickshaw while Amey took pictures. Next time, I couldn't be so impetuous.

*

The trains at Nashik Road Station noisily arrived before noisily departing. The Tatkal line jostled, japed, screamed and shoved me around like a twig in a typhoon. The noon sun was a

pale yellow, while the wind was a cool breeze. This was the pleasant norm for winters in Nashik.

But appearances were deceiving, for nothing was normal.

Three days ago, Amey and I had returned to Mumbai from Nagpur. There, my confidence that we could explain the situation to Dnyanesh was broken. He insisted that I should follow up with the students over the phone. Eventually, he gave the real reason.

"Look, the editors in Kochi will not understand this. They will just keep asking for the story every day. What do I tell them?"

The Tatkal line swayed ahead as the train approached the platform. I trudged forward, thinking about the conversation with the bureau chief. If Dnyanesh himself didn't understand, why would he convince his seniors? How was I, alone, to convince the entire Kochi and Delhi offices?

Nupur's hearsay, Anuradha's statement, Anuj's letter, Harkishanji's tears... pointless without proof. I promised them that I would report this story. I had a responsibility to them as a journalist, as a Marathi manus. But the story itself had to be irrefutable, and time was running out. Ravi Bhavan was alerted, which meant it was possible that the crooks were locking up shop. I needed a reason, an excuse, an opportunity to go to Nagpur as soon as possible.

And, day before yesterday, when my elder sister called, opportunity did present itself... only in a cruel, backhanded way.

Our father had fainted and fallen unconscious in our house. He was admitted to the hospital. Again.

Dnyanesh immediately gave me leave for Nashik until next Monday. I reached dada's hospital that evening. My father looked weak, but from the inside, he was always strong as steel. We still hired him a private attendant: after all, aai had passed away in 2004, and my father was eighty-five now.

The Tatkal line reached the coach. I forced my way inside. No place to sit, as expected. I stood for six hours before sitting near

a stinking wash basin. While I stood and sat amidst the noisy defiance of India's impoverished working-class, I ruminated over my choice.

The lesser evil.

Yesterday afternoon, the moment dada was discharged, I called the G.M.C. students and Mr. K, and told them to expect me there by the weekend. I bade my family a casual farewell, not mentioning where I was really headed.

I told Amey nothing. Dnyanesh Jathar knew nothing.

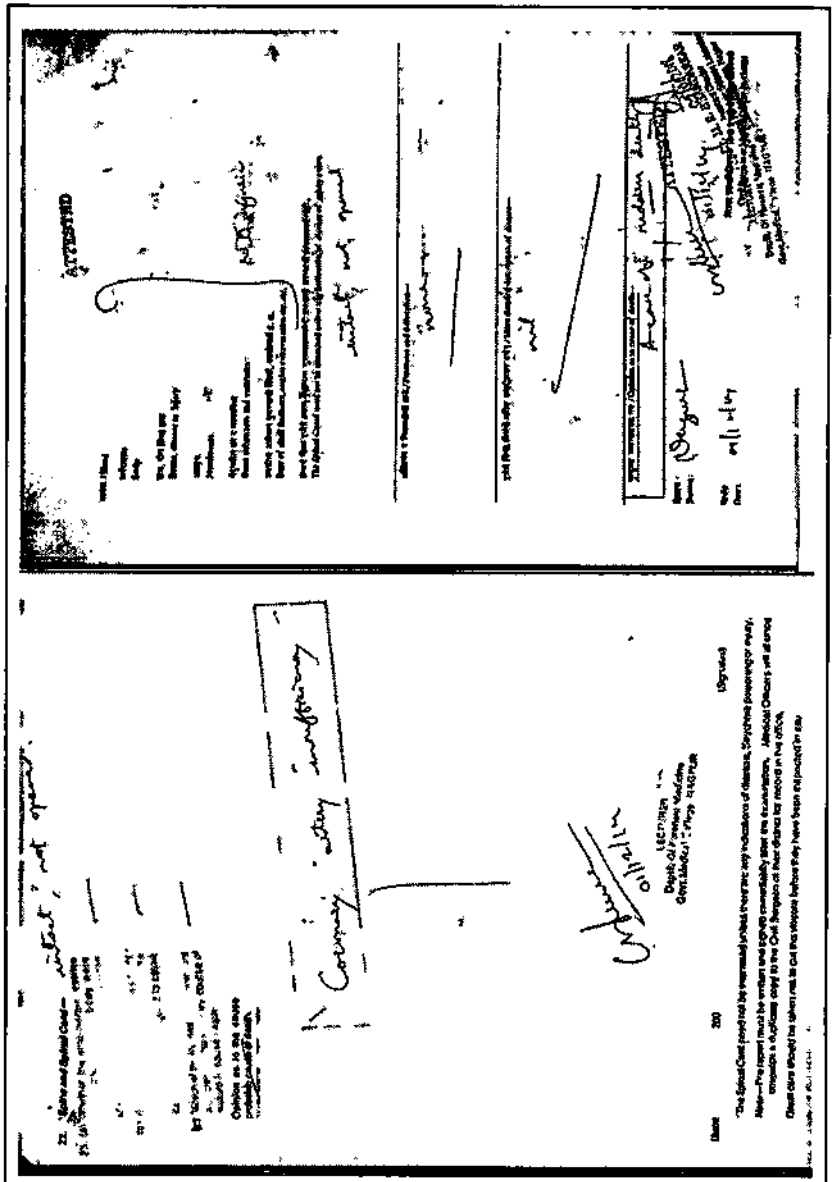
The bureau chief thought I was still in Nashik, aiding my father. My wife thought I was headed to Mumbai, back to bread-and-butter stories, back to the grind. Instead, I was inside a filthy, jam-packed train hurtling headfirst into Nagpur alone, not one week after being compromised at Ravi Bhavan. It was dishonest, it was inconceivably dangerous... but it was the lesser evil.

There was no time for soul-searching when a murderer needed to be put in chains.

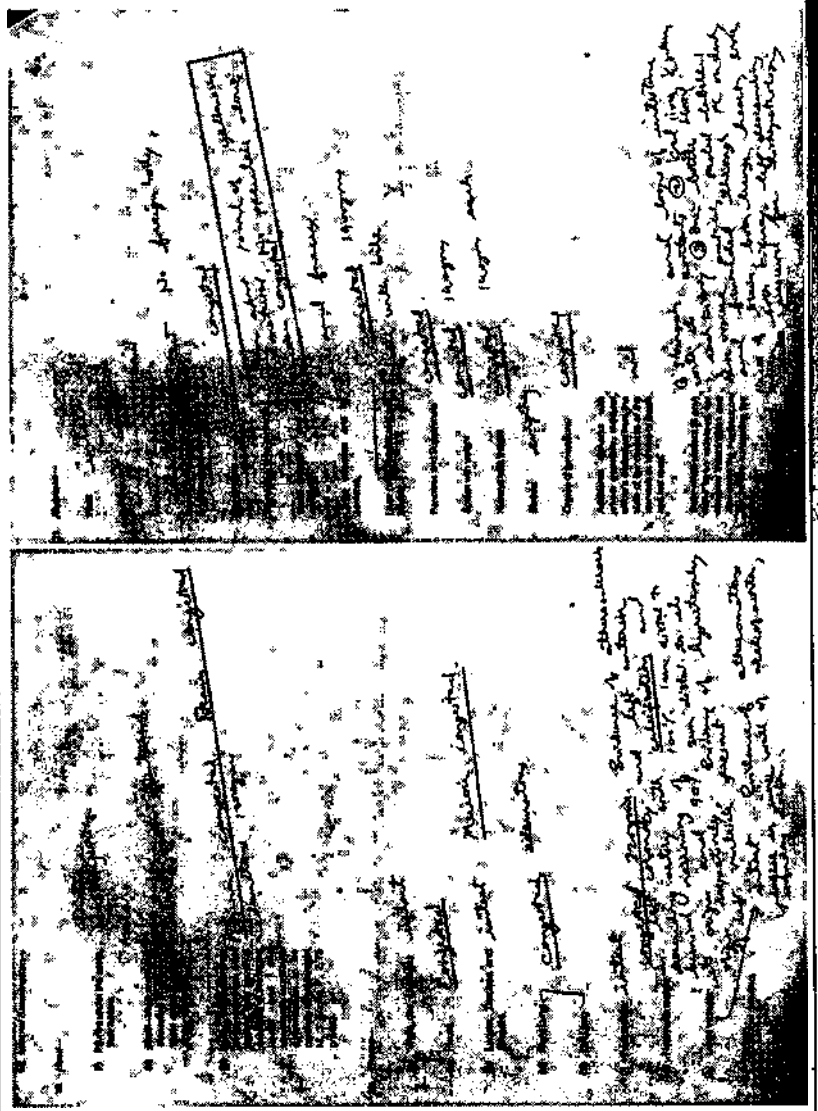
Onward the road beckoned; onward I must pursue.

****

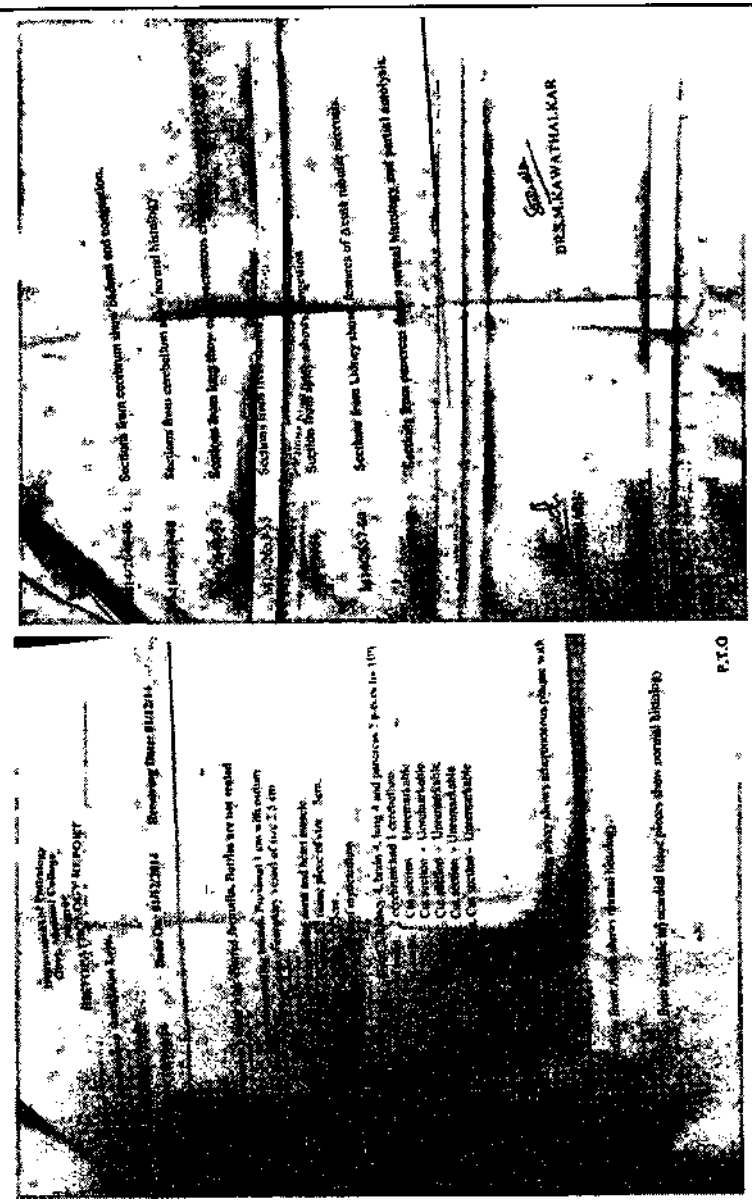
Late Brijgopal Harkishan Loya



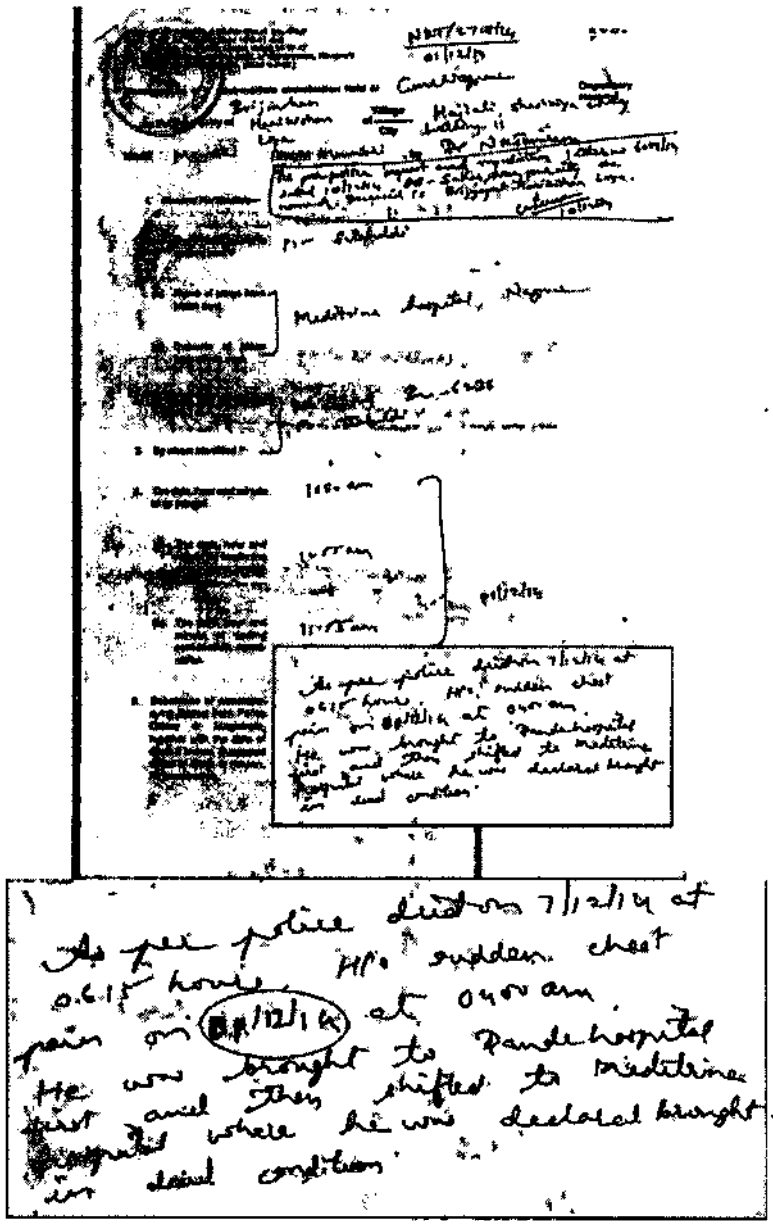
Postmortem report mentions Cause of Death



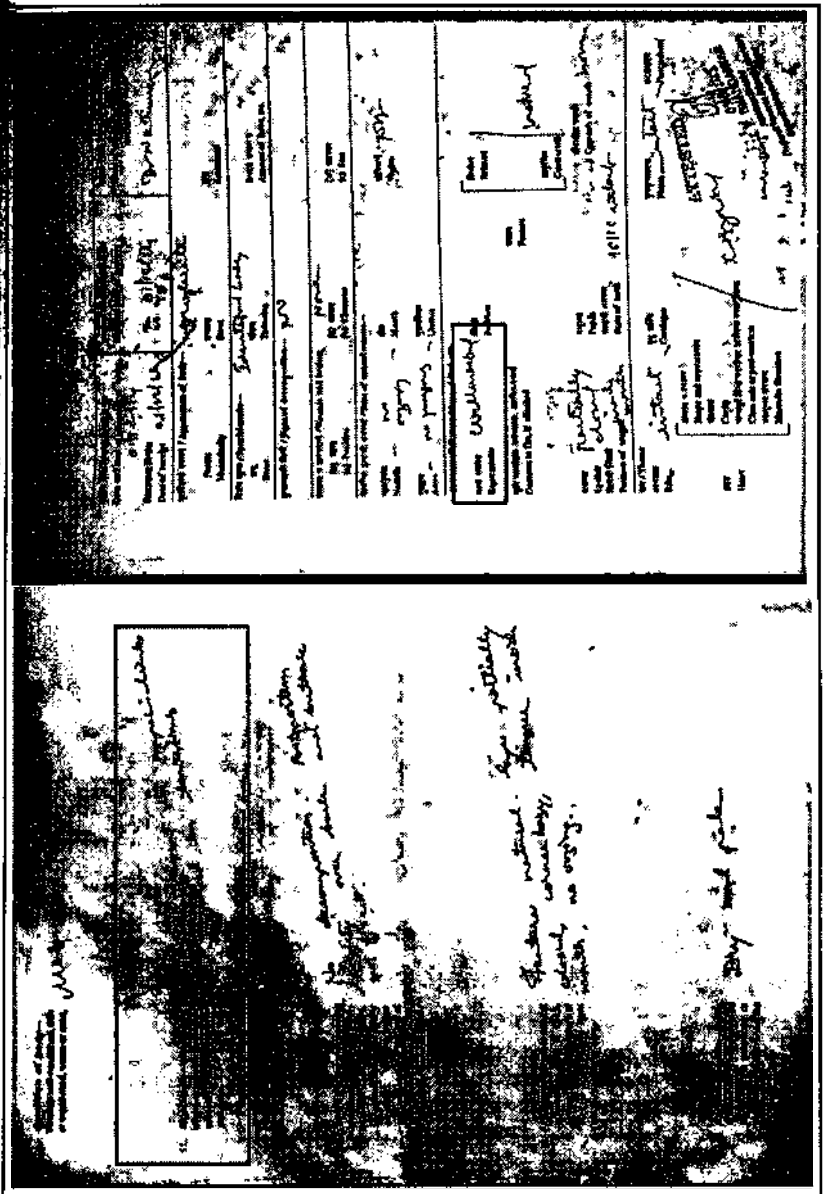
The report shows congestion of several organs



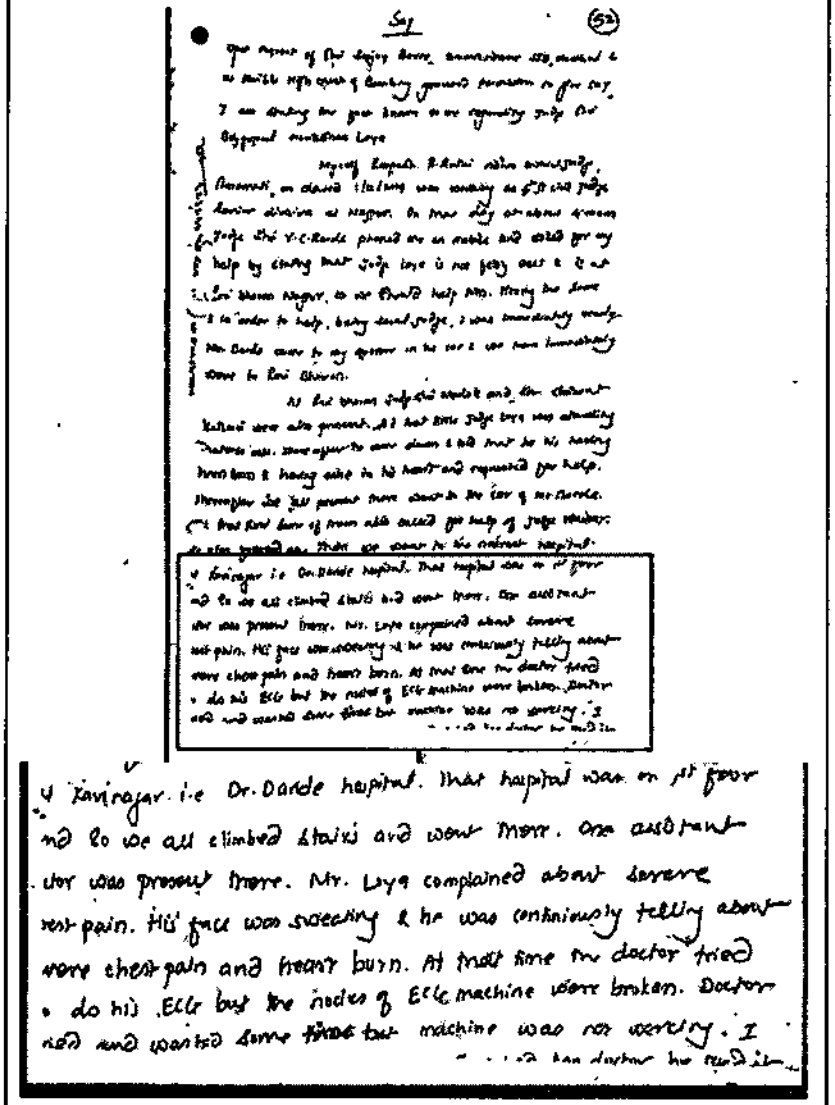
Histopathology report implies poisoning & assault



Overwriting of date in the postmortem report



PM report shows Rigor mortis in limbs but forensic report shows Rigor mortis "Well marked" in the body

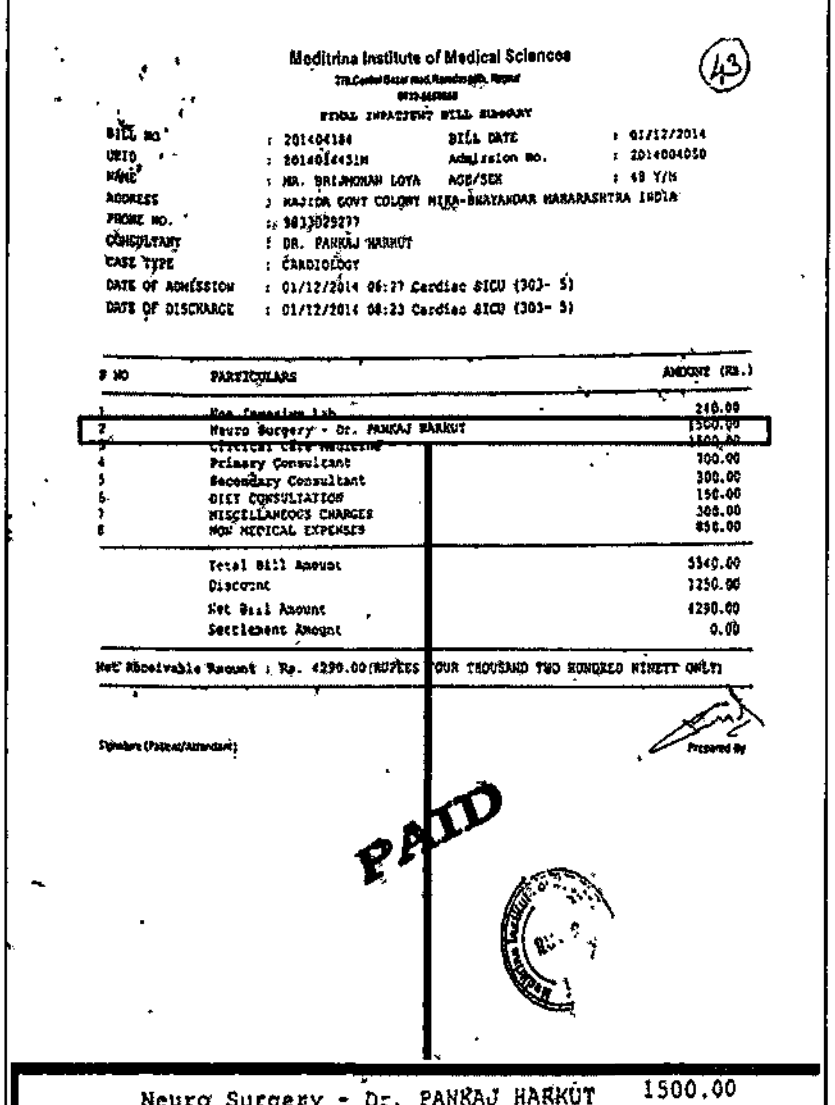


Say (52)

[illegible]

Kavinagar i.e Dr. Dande hospital. That hospital was on 1st floor and so we all climbed stairs and went there. One assistant doctor was present there. Mr. Loya complained about severe chest pain. His face was sweating & he was continuously telling about severe chest pain and heart burn. At that time the doctor tried to do his ECG but the nodes of ECG machine were broken. Doctor tried and wasted some time but machine was not working. I [illegible]

Judge Rathi wrote to the Supreme Court that ECG machine nodes at Dande Hospital were broken



Meditrina Institute of Medical Sciences

(43)

FINAL INPATIENT BILL SUMMARY

BILL NO	: 201404184	BILL DATE	: 01/12/2014
UNID	: 2014014431M	Admission No.	: 2014004050
NAME	: MR. BRIJMOHAN LOYA	AGE/SEX	: 48 Y/M
ADDRESS	: MAJIDA GOVT COLONY MIRA-BHAYANDAR MAHARASHTRA INDIA		
PHONE NO.	: 9833029277		
CONSULTANT	: DR. PANKAJ HARKUT		
CASE TYPE	: CARDIOLOGY		
DATE OF ADMISSION	: 01/12/2014 06:27 Cardiac SICU (303- 5)		
DATE OF DISCHARGE	: 01/12/2014 08:23 Cardiac SICU (303- 5)		

S NO	PARTICULARS	AMOUNT (Rs.)
1	Non Immunoassay Lab	240.00
2	Neuro Surgery - Dr. PANKAJ HARKUT	1500.00
3	Critical Care Medicine	1500.00
4	Primary Consultant	700.00
5	Secondary Consultant	300.00
6	DIET CONSULTATION	150.00
7	MISCELLANEOUS CHARGES	300.00
8	NON MEDICAL EXPENSES	850.00
	Total Bill Amount	5540.00
	Discount	1250.00
	Net Bill Amount	4290.00
	Settlement Amount	0.00

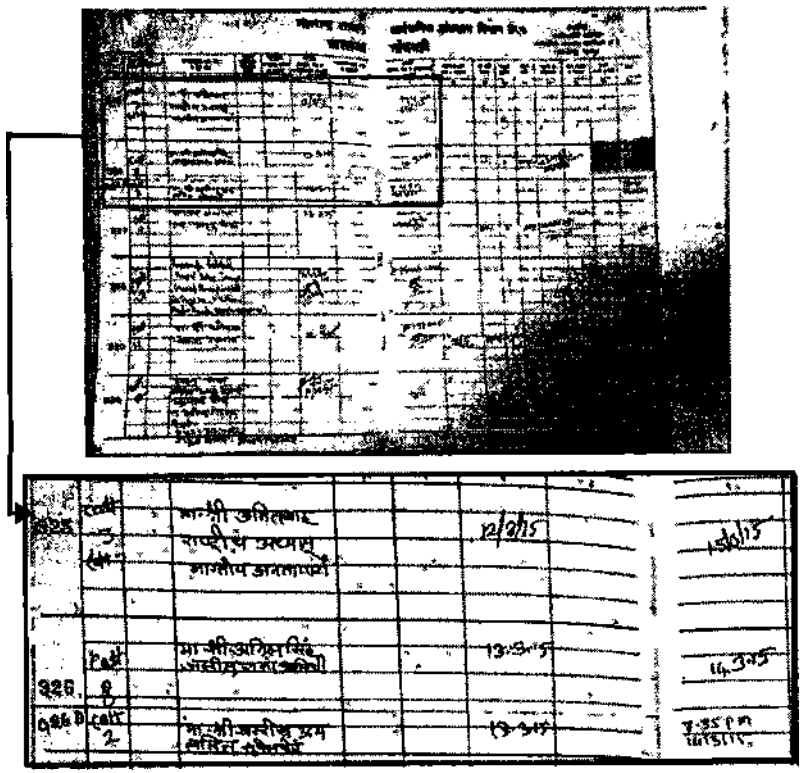
Net Receivable Amount : Rs. 4290.00 (RUPEES FOUR THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED NINETY ONLY)

Signature (Patient/Attendant) Prepared By

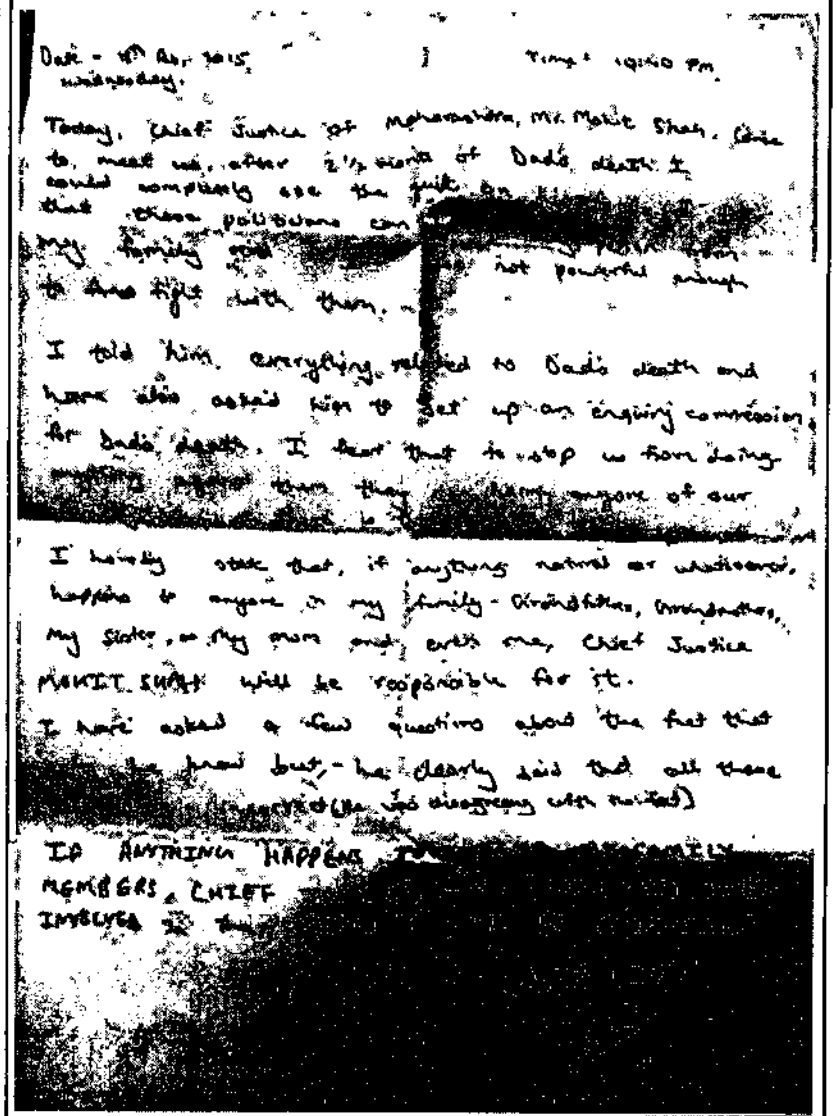
PAID

Neuro Surgery - Dr. PANKAJ HARKUT 1500.00

Neuro Surgery was done on Judge Loya's dead body



Amit Shah had stayed in Ravi Bhavan
with Judges of the Supreme Court



Anuj Loya's letter shows his helplessness

With Jayant Sonawane

With Kiran Phokmare & Manas Pagar

Pratik Nandgaonkar :
he lived like my shadow to ensure my safety

9. Real and Demonstrative Evidence

FIRST stop: Government Medical College.

The rickshaw left from the Nagpur hotel in the morning. However, it barely crossed Yashwant Stadium when four guys on two Bajaj Pulsars zoomed past the auto, signalled us to stop and slowed down themselves. One bike blocked our path, and the rickshaw was forced to halt.

A biker got down and stuck his head inside, from the rickshawalla's side. He had hungry eyes and spoke in rowdy Hindi.

"Are you a journalist? Why are you in Nagpur?"

"Yes, I am. I'm here for a story."

The man smiled.

"Okay. Take care."

He afforded himself the pause of a lifetime before retreating and sitting back on the pillion. His T-shirt had an odd

florescent design on its back.

"Drop me off at the next signal," I told the rickshawalla, the moment the bikers left. He did.

I lowered the cap on my head, sauntered on the streets for five minutes, then hired another auto to G.M.C. Before crossing the gate, I stuffed rocks and broken bricks at the bottom of the backpack. If required, this would be a good weapon. Those four guys had caught me by surprise, but the thugs probably thought they had a pithy journalist quaking in his sandals, when they had made me wise to their games instead.

Always wanted to be the protagonist of a spy-thriller, I reminded myself, walking the wings of the college, keeping spirits cheery.

The first MD student met me near some staircases.

"We could have met in the canteen."

"Can't. I accidentally met a political worker at the gate," I lied. "He wanted me to meet some patient and cover his story. It's a minor scuffle involving party karyakartas. I didn't want the distraction."

"Wow... these people must be knowing you rather well, because you come here for assembly sessions. Anyway, what is the plan?"

"Not much. I'm waiting for you to introduce me to your seniors."

"Oh yes. We're meeting a few tonight. One of them is a doctor. It's his birthday, and he invited me to join. You want to come along?"

"Sure. Nothing wrong in wishing someone on their birthday."

The student told me the location of the restaurant and

asked me to reach by 7:30 p.m. We chatted for a while about other MD students before I left. At the G.M.C. gate stood a dark-skinned young man, leaning against the gate. His shirt had the same florescent design.

I held the strap of the backpack in my fist. Before crossing the gate, I eyeballed him. Goggles. Black, full-sleeve T-shirt.

I walked past him and found an auto. He ignored me.

"Boss, find me a good restaurant. I need Saoji mutton thali," I told the rickshawalla. Cat-and-mouse games were a ravenous affair.

*

The hotel's receptionist, when I approached him, was feverishly scribbling something in a dusty-looking binder. A glimpse into the world of his worries almost made me jealous.

"I'm going to watch a movie and will be late. One of my friends was supposed to come here. Please tell him that I will meet him tomorrow. Thanks."

The streets leading up to Yashwant Stadium were chilly and friendless. Walking them helped awake tired bones. Because I did not sleep in the train, I had caught only two hours of shut-eye in the previous day and a half. I hailed an auto while thinking about the request to the receptionist. There was no friend, no movie. It was a bogus message to mislead any thugs asking about my whereabouts.

The lie, however, made me feel slightly lonely.

The MD students were at the back of a dimly lit resto-bar with wooden furniture. Aside from wilted and plastic bouquets on tables, everything about the place screamed shady. My student friend from the morning waved at me.

"Happy birthday," I introduced myself to Dr. P, who had

completed his MD and was now practising. The man was already a pint down, and eager to chat.

"Our mutual friend was just telling me about you," he said. "It's nice to know that you are reporting about Freeships. I also liked your idea of crowdfunding to address the issue. Many of us seniors will also contribute."

Others came and joined. The group soon swelled to ten. Everyone began chatting about courses and exams. There was no chance to broach Freeships, forget Judge Loya. At one point, P even asked if they were boring me.

"Don't worry about me," I said patiently. "I'm also learning new things. But I'd love to meet you again, whenever you can spare time."

"Sure, let's do that."

I took that as a win and left around half-past nine. The bitter winds were beginning to bite. My body screamed for sleep. Another slow day. The investigation was at a snail's pace, and Nagpur was only getting colder.

Tired, I reached the hotel, where the receptionist caught my eye.

"Back already? Did you not get ticket for the movie? There were two guys here asking about you and your company. I told them we can't share such information with unknown persons."

"Did they leave a number? A message?"

"No. Your friend also did not come."

"Thank you."

I collapsed on the modest bed of the modest room, thinking about florescent thugs, the Intelligence Bureau Officer's advice at Kyani, and dada and my family. White rays of the moon wafted indoors, my sole society.

*

"These are colour xerox copies of the guest register of Ravi Bhavan: 29th November 2014 to 3rd December 2014."

The following morning, Mr. K and I were back at the PWD office. After stress-waking at six, I checked out of the hotel room instead of playing the sitting duck for florescent thugs. Draped in a cap and leather jacket (mornings were as unforgivingly cold as eves), K and I met at a petrol pump before heading to PWD's parking lot. I had booked a nightly train back to Mumbai, and needed a bird in the hand before leaving Nagpur for the second time. Therefore, we decided to meet the officer without appointment, take him unawares, and flex our skills of perusal to expedite the process... not knowing that K's PWD friend became useful without need for sweet-talk, to which I was as relieved as I was impressed.

"But Judge Loya's name is not in the register," the officer pointed out, spreading the xeroxed papers on the desk, turning them around and pushing them towards me. "There are entries of other judges, but not his."

"This can't be. Dr. Biyani told me that Judge Loya called his wife at 11 p.m. He told her that he's staying in Ravi Bhavan."

"There are entries of other judges you mentioned, like Kulkarni," the officer pointed out. "He might have stayed with them?"

"Unlikely. A CBI Special Court Judge would not share a room with junior judges. It's not—"

I stopped.

Aha.

"Bhau, shouldn't the page numbers be in series, for these four dates? Either your man missed a page to copy, or it was torn

before copying."

K was shocked. "You're right. If true, this is a clear-cut case of tampering and hiding evidence."

The PWD officer immediately called the person who got him the papers. They spoke for a while.

"He says that the page was missing. He was told that somebody spilled chai on it, and hence it had to be torn. But he says the entries were carried forward from the next page."

However, Judge Loya's entry was missing on the following pages. This went against several witnesses and documents confirming that he was staying at Ravi Bhavan. Having found proof of tampering with evidence, K and I went to a restaurant, pleased with the day's output.

"I'm sure there will be many such anomalies in records," I told K.

"You know what," I continued, "every district collectorate has a protocol officer who keeps a record of VIP movements. He also makes arrangements for local transport. Can we go to the Collector's office to find out?"

"It's a long shot," K replied. "But you're in luck. A distant relative of mine works there."

K made a call and, one hour later, he and I were pulling into the parking lot of the Collector's office, where K's relative—a middle-aged man in white shirt and blue trousers—was waving at us.

"The record is hardly 8-10 pages," he said, handing K a polythene bag with papers. "Very less official VIP movement apart from Chief Minister saheb and few leaders. Why do you need it?"

"My friend," he said, pointing casually at me, "is doing some research on how VIP movements are recorded by

government, and how elaborate the plans are."

White-Shirt shrugged.

"Don't know what's there to research. It's just protocol. Anyway, I'm off to take my lunch."

We headed to K's home and pored over the papers. At first, it seemed to be a waste of time. The movement of judges was unlikely to be part of the District Protocol Officer's record, especially if the judges were only there to attend a wedding. Loya's name, as expected, was nowhere, although there were names like Devendra Fadnavis, Nitin Gadkari and Mohit Shah...

Mohit Shah...

"Look at this. Chief Justice Mohit Shah visited Nagpur exactly on the same days as Judge Loya. He was there when the Judge died. But he took over two months to express condolences to the family?"

We analysed the documents with renewed vigour, and I soon uncovered more dirt.

"Oh shit, this is horrendous... Amit Shah stayed at Ravi Bhavan in March for 3-4 days. 13th March to 16th March 2015. He stayed with Supreme Court's Justice Sharad Bobde, Justice Uday Lalit and Bombay High Court's Justice N.W. Sambhre. Even CBI Lawyer Anil Singh, prosecution lawyer of the Sohrabuddin trial, was there. Look, here are their suite numbers."

"Why?" K asked. "Main accused of CBI along with all these people?"

"This also needs investigation. Although Amit Shah was discharged on 30th December 2014, it's conspicuous for them to be at Ravi Bhavan in March."

To account for the possibility that Amit Shah's visit to Nagpur was related to a political program, I called a journalist

friend of mine (who worked at a prominent Marathi daily) to confirm if Shah or any of the others were in Nagpur for public events, official duties, or anything newsworthy. He rang back in half an hour and confirmed that this was not the case.

This visit, therefore, was incognito. What they chatted about was (and, perhaps, will forever be) unknown, but impulse told me it wasn't banter regarding Haldiram's sweets.

"Now I understand why an investigation was not probably appointed for Judge Loya's death," I mooted.

*

Time crawled and time ran.

The crescent moon turned full; the full moon turned crescent.

In Mumbai, I kept my head small and silly, writing stories on Chhagan Bhujbal's alleged money laundering, or the effects of demonetization on farmers in Nashik. Dnyanesh remained his usual submissive self. Dada's health swayed like a see-saw, although his morale never deterred. My elder sister contracted cancer, and was scheduled for surgery.

And I, every Friday, took leave and snuck away to the eastern edge of Maharashtra.

The fourth weekend was particularly eventful. Till this point, I had met Dr. P a couple of times after his birthday party. We both loved Saoji mutton, and he wanted to help me write the Freeship story. On this particular weekend, we had met on a Saturday night to chat about P's college life, before the government stopped Freeship money.

"It was around Rs. 70,000 - 72,000 a month," P recounted. "I had to use it for college fees, books, hostel expenses, mess bills, etc. I could spare around ten thousand to my family back home.

But everything changed after the BJP took over. Baba had to borrow money from relatives and friends so that I could complete my degree. My lifestyle really changed."

After a while, P began talking about campus life in general. He mentioned Makarand Vyawahare, a doctor who was notorious for throwing his power around, because his brother-in-law was Sudhir Mungantiwar, a Maharashtra cabinet minister.

"That guy... he's a real fraud. No one can stand up to him, because he keeps everyone under his thumb. He steals supplies from the G.M.C. for his private clinic. He also botches post-mortems."

My ears perked up. This was my peg!

"Oh yeah," I agreed casually. "A colleague once told me how there was a lot of chaos during the post-mortem of a VIP body. He wants to do a story on that. It was related to some top court official, I think?"

"I remember," Dr. P said. "Vyawahare was involved there too. I should know, I was in the room."

I could neither believe my luck, nor my ears. I have a lead.

P was still talking. "...if you read the post-mortem report, there are so many discrepancies in that too."

"How can I read it?" I said, struggling to be casual. "I don't even have it."

"No worries, sir," he said. "Your friend needs the documents? Next time, when we meet, I'll show you."

*

The next day, I was heading to G.M.C. and stopped at a chowk to change the auto. By this point, I was switching modes of transport every couple of kilometres, not to mention changing hotels like changing clothes. However, florescent thugs still

caught up with me. The moment I exited the rickshaw, a biker stopped. He had the same design on his back.

The man removed his visor and spoke in Hindi.

"Where are you going?!"

Frustrated, I sat on his bike and patted him on the back. He was shocked.

"I'm going to your house! Take me! I will stay with you now. Chalo! Let's go!"

He started shaking the bike, not knowing what to say.

"Do you think I am a chutiya, a fool? You think I am roaming around Nagpur without proper protection?" I bluffed. "Now take me to your home!"

"Are you mad? Get down!"

He shook the Yamaha more vigorously. I hugged him from behind. "No... now I want to come to your home."

We were creating a scene, which was not what he wanted. Eventually, the biker pushed the side-stand, got down and yelled at me to get off. I followed suit, with a scoff that was colder than the winter.

"Baad mein dekh lunga," were his last words, before the bike became a cloud of dust. I was not to know that baad mein meant that very afternoon.

While I waited at the G.M.C. canteen for the MD student, the Yamaha biker came back with two other guys. All of them had the same florescent design on their clothing. They sat around me.

"Why do you come here?"

"Who are you to ask me?"

"Don't try to be smart. Don't invite trouble for yourself."

"I am not trying. I am smart. And capable of handling any

trouble."

Just then, one of the students sat beside me. The poor man was smiling and didn't realize what was going on. The goons turned on him.

"Who are you? Why does this man keep coming here?"

"I am a student," he said, eyes turning wary. "He is a journalist friend. We are not getting scholarship money meant for Scheduled Caste students. We want him to do a story on our Freeship."

They began asking the student questions on Freeships, and my cover worked wonders. As their tone of voice changed from intimidating to childlike curiosity, I surmised that they were all from scheduled castes. It was genuinely funny to see the thugs forget why they were there, and listen eagerly to hardships caused to their own people by the Central Government.

"What is wrong in this? He should write about this," a goon eventually said.

"But... why did you go to Ravi Bhavan?" another goon asked, trying to force an authoritative tone.

"I am an accredited journalist, and allowed to stay in government guest houses for Rs. 200 a day. I went to see if I could get a room there instead of paying much more in hotels," I replied coolly.

They got up.

"I don't see anything wrong in this. Just don't do anything that gets you in trouble."

"I don't need anybody's permission to do what I believe," I bit back. They shrugged, unoffended, and left.

But the MD student looked slightly worried. "Who were those guys? Why were they asking me about your job?"

"This often happens with investigative journalists on the field. The real news is the one which many people want to hide. Don't worry about these things too much."

We chatted for a while. "Before I forget," the student said before leaving, "P wants to meet you tonight. He has a message for you."

My heart skipped a beat.

*

The resto-bar looked the same as before, and Dr. P sat on the same corner table as his birthday. My fingers twitched with anticipation. This time, I had set off a good fifteen minutes earlier, to ensure no one was tailing me. If P had found the post-mortem report, he and I would be marked men. As a wise man said: I could not be over-cautious enough.

We smiled. We shook hands. I sat.

"I have a surprise gift for you," he said right away. He pulled out a small bunch of papers and casually handed them across the table.

"This is the post-mortem report of one Brij Loya, a Judge from Mumbai."

I was stunned.

"He was the VIP I was talking about. I still remember the day. There were quite a few people outside, waiting for the post-mortem to get over. One of the persons was also a Judge. He was constantly crying like a child. 2-3 guys were trying to calm him down. They were desperate that he calmed down."

Suddenly, P's voice dropped to a whisper. I leaned over, despite trying my utmost to not appear uninterested.

"Listen, the post-mortem report was not written by the doctor who signed on it. It was given to him, and he signed it. And

the whole thing was done in such a rush, that even a photographer and videographer were not called to record it."

I went through the papers briefly. Someone had corrected Loya's name from Brijmohan to Brijgopal. The body, it said, was handed over to a maiyatacha chulatbhau—a paternal cousin.

"Who did these corrections?" I asked. "Who was this chulatbhau to whom the body was handed over?"

"I don't know. It didn't happen in front of us. I mean, I saw a person take the body and help put it in the ambulance, but I don't know his name. The crying man tried to go near the body, but others were stopping him. He was limping."

I noted down things like 'paternal cousin' and 'limping man' in my diary. Dr. P suddenly became stiff. His tone changed.

"Never mention my name. I don't want any trouble."

"No yaar, never," I said quickly. "I'm not working on this story. My beat is politics, not crime. I had just overheard about such a post-mortem, and happened to ask you about it. That's all."

To downplay the fact that I was hunting for this evidence for nearly half a year, I casually stuffed it in my backpack along with the diary. We changed the topic to the dinner menu and reservation. I kept the bag near my foot and poked it intermittently, to ensure it was still there. We enjoyed Saoji mutton and good, lengthy conversation. Time passed. We even ordered desserts after dinner. However, at this point, my stomach rumbled like a tidal wave, and I didn't touch it. Regardless, I showed no hurry to leave, although I wanted to photocopy the report as soon as humanely possible.

After dinner, Dr. P and I took a leisurely stroll at a nearby chowk. He awkwardly stopped at a nearby bus stop.

"Sir, let's sit here for a while."

We sat. He requested me to pull out the post-mortem report.

"Promise me that my name will never come up," he repeated, taking the report from my hands. "I know you are not a crime reporter, but I can understand a journalist's curiosity."

I held his hand. "I promise. This is my word to you as an elder brother, and I will honour it till my death."

P smiled. He walked me through the report, explaining terms like 'rigor mortis' and 'dura'. Before he handed the report to me, he tapped his finger on it until the nail turned white.

"A good forensic science expert will tear this apart and conclude, without a single doubt or hesitation, that this was a murder."

"Oh my God."

Dr. P gave me a grave look.

"Sir, I have seen the atmosphere when the body was brought to G.M.C. The hurry. The tense surroundings. People talking on phones in every corner. Every pair of eyes piercing all the doctors. The limping man, crying like a child."

He and I were silent for a while. The bus stop, the passers-by, the night sky and all of Nagpur City had evaporated around us. Only the report existed, only the report was real.

"Tomorrow, I'll get you the forensic report and histopathology report. There are suspicious discrepancies in those too," P said.

But tomorrow never came. That was, alas, the last time we spoke. Dr. P soon blocked me on WhatsApp, never answered my calls and fled the city for a place I won't disclose. Till this day, I pray for his well-being, and remain eternally indebted for his courage toward me, Judge Loya and India.

*

After much difficulty, a source at the pathology lab had agreed to meet me at the parking lot in G.M.C. To be honest, 'parking lot' was a fancy term for a bunch of two-wheelers leaning against a wall.

Speaking of two-wheelers: the florescent bikers were still tailing me, but nowadays they waved hands whenever we made eye-contact. I also waved back, smiling. Instances like these reminded me of how idiotic and cowardly their employers must be. Cowardly, because they hired fringe elements from classes they considered lower to do their own dirty work. Idiotic, because they had no idea that—under the guise of the Freeship issue—the bikers and I had found common camaraderie.

Anyway, this contact was a distant acquaintance of K. I messaged him while sitting on a parked bike. He arrived soon after. When it came to him, I used the family angle.

"I have the post-mortem report," I told him truthfully, "but I don't have other reports. Judge Loya's sister requested me to get these copies. I'm a family friend."

The guy looked around. "But K told me that you are a journalist?"

"I am. But I'm also a family friend of Judge Loya's sister, Anuradha. She's a government doctor at Dhule. Since I come to Nagpur often for political news, Dr. Biyani asked me to get the reports."

"Oh. She is also a doctor? Okay then. Let me look for it. Right now, I'm worried for my son's future. He's doing engineering. But I will find out the reports whenever I get time."

"Sure. Look, your worries about his education or job can be solved. I know a few people in Mumbai and Pune, and can also get K to help you. But Dr. Biyani has lost her only brother. It's been

two years and the family still doesn't have any medical report. That's why I'm requesting you."

Soon after, K and I headed to the PWD office. The usual officer was not there, but his junior welcomed us and handed an A3 envelope to my friend. "I was asked to get these xerox copies for you. Sir is on site visits today."

The envelope contained copies of Ravi Bhavan's guest register for four months, starting from 29 November, 2014. As expected, it had no mention of Judge Loya or Judge Modak. This, too, had the record of Amit Shah's stay with the judges and CBI lawyer. This was a more direct piece of evidence than the district collectorate's records.

"This is perfect. So, is the story complete?" K asked.

"Almost. It would be great if I get the other medical records. I also need to visit Dande and Meditrina hospitals for comments."

"Wait for the reports and then visit these hospitals. Only go there in the end."

*

For fifteen days, I did not set foot in Nagpur.

The post-mortem was the smoking gun, and now that it was secured, I went back to Mumbai and took multiple backups of it. Meanwhile, K began working his contact to find the histopathology and forensic reports. To be honest, the post-mortem was probably enough for any other journalist. But since it concerned Amit Shah, it was imperative to pursue this allegation to its logical end. Therefore, the two other reports were necessary.

Of course, there was no need for my presence in the city until K convinced him, which was why I went back to Mumbai. THE WEEK's office was becoming chaotic. The magazine had

begun focusing on its website, and we were asked to file two stories per day for the online portal. Occasionally, R. Prasannan, Sachi sir, Stanley Thomas and Lukose Mathew came from New Delhi to beef with our bureau, as part of petty politics not worth mentioning. Chief Photographer Janak Bhat gave me grief about taking Fridays off, but shut his mouth when he learned of my father's condition.

Two weeks later, K informed me that the source had found the documents. By that evening, K and I were back at G.M.C.'s parking lot.

"I was about to call you!" the source said. "I was grateful that you helped me with my son."

And, just like that, he pulled out a bunch of papers from under his shirt.

"Histopathology report. Forensic recommendation report. Viscera analysis and Forensic report. His viscera samples are still preserved in the lab. The sample numbers are listed in the report."

"Thank… you," I said, turning weak at the knees.

"Sir, I understand the dead man's sister's concern," he simply said. "Moreover, she must be very curious, being a doctor herself. Please give my regards to her."

There was no time for chit-chat, nor was there time to examine the documents. K and I sat in his car before any security guards or florescent bikers asked what we were up to.

"I haven't seen anyone following up anything so rigorously, Niranjan. Congratulations."

"This is huge," I kept saying. "I'm not going to read these documents right now. I'll read these during the train journey home. There, I can really pore over them."

"Oh yeah. About that."

K stopped at a travel agent's place. He told me to wait in the car. Within ten minutes, he was back with a boarding pass.

"Last flight to Mumbai. Tonight. I am dropping you. I know you want to visit the two hospitals, and I'm sure the true purpose of your visits will be revealed there. Hence, no more risks. Go by flight!"

*

What happened at Dande and Meditrina Hospitals was a foregone conclusion. At Dande, I handed the receptionist my card and asked her to speak to the relevant doctors regarding the medication administered to Judge Loya. A few minutes later, a young doctor arrived with a stout, potbellied person.

"We didn't have any such patient and we don't disclose patient's information to the press. You may go," the young doctor said, while the potbellied man kept his hand on my chest.

"Go," he said.

"Don't touch me, you will regret it. Besides, I got what I wanted."

The idiot doctor did not realize that he had just blatantly lied about Judge Loya not being admitted at Dande Hospital.

Meditrina Hospital was a similar story. Four security guards were standing in front of the glass-panelled entrance. When I tried to enter, the guards asked, rather politely, if I had any patient inside.

"No. I'm here to inquire about a case in the past."

"Unfortunately, the main doctors are all busy today as a VIP is here for a visit," the guard said. "No general visitors are allowed inside."

The only thing I could see, through the glass, was some frantic running around.

I smiled at the guard and returned to the car, pleased that the formalities were over. On the way to the airport, K made a call to a guy and asked him to come to a Haldiram Sweets showroom. We went there ourselves, and I stocked up on orange barfee. Eventually, K's friend came. They hugged. K asked the guy to lend him his SUV for an hour.

"I will drop you at the airport now," K told me. "People must have noticed my car at Dande or Meditrina hospital. Let's not take any risks."

If, dear reader, you ever chance upon a friend like K, never let them go.

*

A couple of days later, after I completed the draft for the Freeship story, and after I had all the time in the world to vet Judge Loya's medical documents, I chanced upon my neighbour Pratik Nandgaonkar at Cotton Green. He was chatting with someone on a street corner.

I took him aside, life in my eyes.

"Pratik, I have the most irrefutable proof for the most important story of my career," I told him.

He was the first to know.

****

10. Slumbering Watchdogs

DNYANESH Jathar, bureau chief of Mumbai's subdivision, cast exhausted eyes at me, Special Correspondent of THE WEEK, traipsing into his office without invite—like a watchman glaring at a student who crossed his hostel gates hours after curfew.

"How's your father?"

"I have it. I have the evidence."

"What... what?"

"Post-mortem," I proudly recited from my diary. "Forensic recommendation report. Histopathology and Viscera report. All the originals are sitting in Cotton Green. They confirm Judge Loya's murder. This story is a go."

"Seriously?"

For several minutes, Dnyanesh and I forgot our differences in opinion, our power relations and chatted about the story like

children discussing favourite flavours of ice cream. Our conclusion was clear and common—in this decade, we couldn't recall a better scoop.

"Send the first draft by this month. But, what about the family? The boy's letter… that says it all. Do you really want to include their names?"

"Dr. Biyani is on record. So is Nupur, though I do not want to involve her. We have Anuj's letter, yes. Harkishanji is on audio, but not on camera..."

"Hmm." The bureau chief removed his spectacles and rubbed his sweaty, glistening eyes. I scratched my earlobes. Innocent sounds from the outside were dimly interfering with our thoughts. I recalled the doctor who disappeared from Nagpur without sight nor sound. An eighty-something imploring me to swear on my daughter's life. Sharmila and Apurva, hiding in their home like ants. Young Anuj's eyes stuck to the living room tiles.

"This puts crosshairs on the Loya family's back," Dnyanesh said, with a tone of finality. "If they are scared, let's not do it. Don't mention their names."

I stood up, proud of my senior. "You're right. I understand."

*

Lukose Mathew had replied, and he did not sound pleased.

That makes two of us.

Within a week of returning from Nagpur, I had emailed the first draft to Lukose, who was News Editor. 'The Mysterious Death of Judge Loya'—as it was initially titled—was written in a fit of frenzy, yet also in accordance with the magazine's guidelines. I stuck to their prescribed 4,500 word-limit, even though I had enough content to fill a book (heh). I condensed my entire

investigation to one singular article, instead of separating it across several parts. Wherever applicable, I substituted names with 'close relatives' or 'family friends'.

Lukose's reply brought both a groan and chuckle. A wondrous achievement. For, amidst the usual faff to tone it down, two things had caught my eye.

"If the Loya family is not ready to come on record," the mail read, "we are not ready to publish the story."

Lukose, as expected, still wanted to put information in the mouth of the victims, and cared little for crosshairs. Never mind that the documents conclusively proved that Judge Loya was murdered! Never mind that the frightened, widowed family still offered a corroborated narrative of the night he was killed!

Poor Lukose probably thought his mandate would set me back a month, not knowing that Anuradha Biyani was willing to state her name for the record. The reason she was excluded was because of our empathy, a concept he would fail to understand. For a desk editor cares not of these things. They care only of the security of the marriage between their chair's cushions and their own buttocks.

The first obstacle was easily surmountable. It was the second that gave me pause for thought.

"This story is incomplete. It requires a reaction from Amit Shah and Chief Justice Mohit Shah."

The fact that I could, with absolutely no trouble, perfectly picture Lukose twirling his thick moustache, smirking in front of his computer and convincing himself that this was a great idea, was a perfect microcosm of the farce tragicomedy that was India's journalism industry. How these good-for-nothings secured sarkari promotions and ran their institutions into the ground with extraordinarily awful directives, was at this point a fascinatingly

recurrent phenomenon.

Of course, one must follow orders. The News Editor was authorized to edit each and every investigative story draft across all bureaus of THE WEEK. This policy, wisely, was to ensure that the journalists had elaborate plans to back their briefs.

It was not to ensure that the wrong people were alerted about impending national controversy at the worst possible time.

"How about we finalize the article, its date of publication, and ask them for comment two days before carrying it? That way, we do not give them time to sabotage the investigation," I offered.

Predictably, he refused.

Of course, when I faxed, emailed and WhatsApped Amit Shah and Mohit Shah my questions, I expected no answers. Of course, I was right.

A six-year-old with a canvas and set of crayons would have predicted this much.

*

A couple of centuries from now, long after our corpses have grown cold and the giant, unceasing tides of history rumble on in sublime indifference, I do not think I shall appear larger than a droplet to the vast ocean of humanity. Perhaps this is the case with everyone. Each of us enter and exit this chaotic, fortuitous milieu that we call our planet as solitary beings. We are brought into Earth alone, which we leave alone. In the interim, we find community in parents, in friends sometimes greater than family, in work colleagues and partners and, of course, in children; the relics of our legacy. They afford our lives meaning as much as we afford it to them.

I clutched my wife close to my shoulder as the flames danced over dada's remains, thinking these thoughts.

I do not know why I did not weep. Perhaps it was because dada was intermittently admitted to the hospital for four, maybe five months. Perhaps I had made mental peace with his death. But I remembered the days when he owned a small newspaper and magazine stall, and I delivered them to Nashik doorsteps at breaks of dawn. I remembered the years he served as Municipal Corporator, and adults thrice my age respected me simply because I was Prabhakar Takle's son.

I reminded myself that there was no chance I would be half the journalist—heck, half the man—I was, without him.

And I do not know why I did not weep.

We rode home from the crematorium at Amardham. I held the wheel, swirling in silent thoughts. How life changed. This time two days ago, I was so happy, I could have danced like the fires. In his office, Dnyanesh Jathar was telling me the best news of my professional life.

"Lukose said you submitted the second draft three days ago?" he began.

"27th February. Yes."

"Good. I need you to email me the audios, photos and videos of Nupur, Dr. Biyani, Advocate Desai and the others. Tell Amey to do the same. Forward me the medical records as well. And any information you have from other sources."

"Janak will have the media related to Anuradha. But... why so?"

"I've been speaking to the higher-ups. They plan to run your investigation this week. Cover story."

Fifteen minutes later, I rushed back to Dnyanesh's office, having forwarded every bit of evidence and testimony that he needed and more. When I entered, he was on the phone with

someone. My exhilaration instantly turned to fear. It is never not unsettling to my ears when my bureau chief, a typically soft-spoken man, is screaming at the top of his lungs.

"What do you mean?! How the hell can you say that? Go look for it! Are you sure? How can you let this happen?! What now! Bye."

He hung up, took a deep breath, and continued in his usual placating monotone.

"I had called Janak Bhat for photos and videos of Dr. Biyani. He said he will call me back. He just did. If I were you, I would file a complaint with the senior editors."

"Why?"

"He deleted them! He says he cannot…"

"Deleted?"

Dnyanesh took another breath. "Deleted," he calmly confirmed.

Thanks to my moment of paranoia back at Dhule, I had the video interview saved on my system. I did not have any pictures, but the video was much more important. I hurriedly uploaded and mailed it to Dnyanesh.

Despite my relief, I still left his office utterly outraged. Why must I navigate through nests of thorns for one simple video, which is not even my job to store? The trough from this peak could not possibly be worse.

Two days later, as I sat in my bereaved, mute Nashik home, I realized I should have been more imaginative.

My phone rang in the silence. Janak.

"Hello?" I sighed.

"Niranjan, they told me to go Dhule to take the photos.

How do I do that? That doctor doesn't even know me. Just tell her to forward me some photos she already has. I need them urgently."

"Janak, I don't have time for this."

The halfwit had called and fought with me yesterday as well, gaslighting me for his follies. I thought he would have the decency to give today a rest.

"You made a mistake," I told him. "You have to fix it."

"But you were the one who interviewed the doctor! You need to speak to her to get the photos. Your story, your responsibility."

"How can you blame me for this? You took a thousand photos! What happened to them? And please don't ask Dr. Biyani to forward photos. She will probably have passport size pictures. The layout designers of the magazine will require great visuals, such as the Dhule hospital as background. She won't have photos like that on hand."

"Niranjan, this is not done--"

But I was done.

"Janak, go to Dhule. Beg, borrow, do whatever. Tell her you deleted them by accident, fall at her feet—do anything, but come back with the damn photos. And count me out! This is not my business."

I hung up the phone with a hot head.

Among the buffoons, cowards and pretentious men who inevitably infiltrated prestigious institutions like THE WEEK, Janak had to be the king of clowns. He and I went together like hot oil and curry leaves, but at least those ingredients simmered, crackled and exploded to create a potentially mouth-watering dish.

Janak and I only created war.

I forced composure on myself. I will not dishonour dada by entertaining office fools on mourning days.

I had fought with seniors, sources, family members and friends to meticulously cobble together evidence for a story that claimed Judge Loya was murdered. When I thought of the tricks I pulled at Nagpur, I could have been inches from death myself. But today, my draft was all but approved, and Dnyanesh had even given me a timeline. Let them deal with the Janak hiccup, I thought. My work was over. It was time to put my feet up and treat the sutak period like the calm after the storm.

For fifteen days, I paid lip-service to calls and did not register a single second of work. For fifteen days, I saw no sign of Judge Loya on the magazine nor website.

Let it slide, I kept reminding myself.

When I return, I will push the editors to publish it by the next fortnight.

How very wrong was I.

*

The village of Deesa stands at a short distance from Palanpur, Gujarat, and almost borders the state of Rajasthan. It was here, around 6 a.m., that the truck full of cattle screeched to a sudden, abrupt halt.

Rafiq Qureshi awoke with a start. Arif, his friend, was murmuring something in his direction. Rafiq scratched his itching kufi skullcap and asked his friend to repeat his words.

"Bhaijaan, we have reached the compound."

They exited the truck, still groggy. Some fifty or hundred men were littered around the wada, standing beside other parked trucks. Other cattle traders were also out of their vehicles, stretching their limbs. Most ignored Rafiq, but some wished him

peace.

"Waalaykum as-salam," he replied to them in return.

Arifbhai introduced him to the wada's owner, the man who was responsible for the thousands of buffaloes, cows, calves, etc. that were inside the compound. They made their introductions quickly.

"We have been driving for a while. Is there a toilet nearby?" Rafiq asked.

"No. Find a spot across the street, in the bushes."

Rafiq left the wada and headed across the deserted road somewhat sleepily, scratching his long and shaggy beard. This was the first time he had been to Deesa. It seemed a beautiful and idyllic hamlet, but perhaps that was because the twilight hid much of the madness.

Someone behind him kept yelling in his direction. Rafiq, Rafiq bhai. Rafiq!

The man must have called twice, thrice, before he crossed the street and hurriedly tapped him on the shoulder.

Rafiq turned. It was Arif.

"Niranjan! Don't forget your fake name!"

"I'm sorry," I said, nearly smiling. "What happened?"

"Some of the bhagva brigade and cattle traders might be watching in your direction. So don't forget to squat. Muslims don't piss standing up."

"They don't? Thank you, Arifbhai."

To be fair, that day in Deesa was among my first with the persona of Rafiq Qureshi, a Muslim cattle trader from Mumbai. From June to September 2017, as my investigation of the illegal cattle extortionists in Gujarat intensified, I became better at

concealing my true identity. I learned how to bargain at secret auctions. I learned how to turn a bull by the rope around its neck. Most of all, I learned the operations of the henchmen who thrashed cattle traders and demanded money and chamdi before allowing them to cross state borders—all backed by the Bajrang Dal.

The adventures I encountered in these months are perhaps fit for a book of its own. However, in the context of Judge Loya, my prolonged period away from Mumbai meant that no one pushed the senior editors to publish the investigation.

Dnyanesh Jathar's promise in early March was, by this time, long forgotten. From then till September, I covered several stories, some of which included the cow vigilante investigation, the Kopardi gang-rape and the effects of demonetization. Of course, the story of Loya's murder mattered most to me, yet whenever I followed up with Dnyanesh, he said that publication process was delayed because of Janak. I disliked Janak, but there was no way the chief photographer was the lone barrier.

During weekly meetings, I realized that I was increasingly the only one arguing for printing the story. Senior editors who were nice to me were being fake, and those being mean were being real. There were days that I struggled to keep it together, and days I suspected they wanted me to lose my cool, so that they could manufacture reasons to undermine me. The struggle was always uphill, but since March, it had reached absurd heights.

Around the middle of 2017, T.R. Gopalkrishnan privately shared that he would retire as editor-in-chief of THE WEEK. By designation, TRG sir was only junior to Philip and Riyad Mathew. He was the only one to support my pitch in Kochi. Not to turn my speculations into allegations, but there was too close a correlation between his retirement and the reluctance of the senior editors to carry the story of Loya's murder.

*

V.S. Jayaschandran was an old, balding and clean-shaven man. The new editor-in-chief sat attentively, as the last weekly meeting of September unfolded.

We were all in the conference room of Malayala Manorama's General Manager's office at Lower Parel. Aside from Dnyanesh Jathar and the Mumbai editors, Senior News Editor Stanley Thomas had also made it to the meeting. These gatherings were mostly a formality. Correspondents and editors discussed which stories were covered last week, and decided what would follow in the next issue.

I was also in attendance, having returned from Gujarat and filed my cow vigilante story. That story was also not carried yet, but I could let that battle lie for another day. Right now, I wanted to know the status of the investigation whose draft was sent more than six months ago.

After the meeting, I took Jayas sir aside before he could leave.

"Sir, I would like to speak with you. Dnyanesh," I asked, as the bureau chief was about to exit, "could you stay?"

"Sure."

I turned to Jayas.

"Sir, what happened about Judge Loya?"

"Why? What happened?"

Behind Jayas, Stanley sir glowered at me. The Senior Editor had his index finger pressed to his lips. This was the first tangible evidence of THE WEEK trying to silence me regarding Loya's story. I could have laughed in his face. I was a few days fresh from being bullied and beaten up by cattle extortionists. After Nagpur, after Gujarat, I still lived and breathed. And Stanley

Thomas thought he scared me?

I ignored him.

"Sir," I explained to my editor-in-chief, "when we field reporters make people speak, we raise expectations. We reassure sources. We make them believe their voices will be heard; whatever the investigation may be. If we convince them to speak and then don't carry the story, they keep following up with us. Nupur Biyani, Anuradha, some sources at Nagpur—so many have been calling me. If we don't run stories like these after promising the world, they feel like we made some deal with the government. This is not only a question of my credibility as field reporter, but also our credibility as a current affairs magazine. So, I ask again: what happened about Loya?"

"No, no," Jayas sir said. "That story was only filled with quotes from family members. We can get sued over it."

"But the medical records? They are evidence—"

"And because of your article on Savarkar, we are already fighting a case in Kottayam."

"What case? I am the author of that article. I have not received a shred of paper about this—from Savarkar's descendant nor from THE WEEK. How can any court begin a trial regarding this, without informing me? This is unheard of."

"No, no, you don't know, we are very busy handling the defamation suit, there is litigation and all to deal with…"

Being allergic to fables, I stormed out of the room. Dnyanesh followed me.

"What a lie this is!"

Dnyanesh was silent.

The bureau chief probably saw me as a crusader, a hothead to be appeased.

Jayas and Stanley probably saw me as a snake in their pretty little garden.

By this point, I had little respect for my seniors. Most of them completed journalism courses and found their way into the head office at Kochi. Without leaving their desks, without venturing half a day into the world they were supposed to report, they rose up the ranks until they gained seniority over us field reporters. TRG sir, having reported stories on the ground, understood the value of fellow ground reporters. But for desk editors like Jayaschandran—who knew nothing of this world—I was only a prickly bone to them. This was the state of the watchdogs of our democracy; constantly slouching and slumbering at the wheel.

But what could I do? I had no time for these games. I was but a lowly correspondent, out only for the lofty truth.

*

The chintz chairs of the Riviera suite's conference room slowly filled with reporters, photographers, correspondents, resident, and senior editors from the entire South-West bureau. Amey Mansabdar and I sat next to each other, watching the others enter. As always, we were among the first to arrive.

This was the place where, more than a year ago, I had planned the final touches of my Judge Loya brief, before heading to the headquarters at Panampilly Nagar. But I was not here for an Investigation Team meeting. This was a South-West bureau meeting, attended by staff members from Mumbai, Gujarat, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and Kerala.

Jayas, Sachi sir, Prasannan sir, Dnyanesh—they were all here. But I only had eyes for the Editor.

Mr. Philip Mathew—first-in-command of THE WEEK, along with being Managing Editor of Malayala Manorama—was

a courteous, kind man, aged comfortably over seventy. He was stockily built, with golden-rimmed spectacles and enviously silver hair. I had never discussed the Judge Loya investigation with Philip sir, since he was absent in the meeting when I had pitched the story.

There would be no higher authority I could hope to meet, and I already had my questions ready. But I did not have to begin the conversation.

I did not even have to wait for the meeting to formally begin.

"Kya Niranjan?" Philip sir said genially, as people kept entering, "What happened?"

"What?"

"Long ago you promised a story about some judge. Every weekly meeting you said you were working, working, working. What working? Where is it? You only talk big and make big promises."

I stood up.

"Sir, I filed that story on 27th February! It has Real and Demonstrative evidences. I then also worked on the very dangerous cow vigilante story for four months. I filed that too."

"No," he said.

The tone was lighter than helium, but the eyes were stiller than Lord Arjun's on the parrot.

"The editors said that there is no story whatsoever in what you have filed."

No story whatsoever?

"I am shocked to know this. The editors never told me this. In fact, Dnyanesh sir said we were going to publish it in March! It was delayed because of a photographer. For a story that is

supposedly not a story—"

I stopped. R. Prasannan, Sachidananda Murthy and Stanley Thomas were glaring at me with equally pointed eyes. Shut up, the eyes said. Calm down. Sit down.

Nobody argues with Philip Mathew. Nobody argues with Manorama.

I sat, but his jibe was the final straw.

No story whatsoever? No story whatsoever?

I had expected fear, which meant I also expected censorship. I expected them to keep nibbling at the sides of the Modi government's greatest exposé, and to green-light the leftovers.

I did not expect this.

At that point, I would not be truthful, nor would I be human, were I to claim that my sole will to publish Judge Loya's murder remained the pursuit of justice. It was that, but it was also resentment. To stand and hear blatant lies (from artisans of words, no less) from a workforce where I often felt at home, which had hitherto protected me from reprisals, had cut in me wounds so deep, I did not know I had those layers until I felt them burn. I could not stand it; I would not stand it.

As the South-West herd of sheep dutifully closed their eyes for the Manorama prayer ritual, I turned to my photojournalist.

"I will not tolerate this. The cow vigilante story is not carried yet. Now this? I am going to quit."

And I did.

I say, I will not suffer condescension from dolts.

The Copyright Act of India states that a journalist's stories are the intellectual property of the media organization unless and

until they reject it. Therefore, I kept hounding the dolts for updates. On 6th November, they finally sent me the official rejection mail.

Five minutes later, I handed in my notice period. The mail was already sitting in my drafts.

When Dnyanesh read it, he immediately called me in. He had tears in his eyes.

I kept him in the dark about Judge Loya. I told him about my elder sister instead, who was in critical condition. He offered to change my resignation into a sabbatical.

I refused.

And that was that.

I look back with no regrets. Over the years, as the BJP's tentacles kept throttling the media, THE WEEK turned from left to centre-left, and centre-left to centre. Many of my respected colleagues—Deepak Tiwari, Kallol Bhattacharya, even Swagata—all of them resigned. In 2021, A Lamb, Lionized was redacted. The arteries of the Investigation Team were slowly but surely snapped. Today, those meetings were probably about breaking coconuts and discussing how best to push the Manorama agenda.

And so, yet another prestigious powerhouse of journalism whimpered like puppies before madmen with saffron flags.

In my death days as an employee, the warning signs were already there. On 2 July, 2017, when THE WEEK called Amit Shah the modern Chanakya, I laughed before I cried. Chanakya was a pragmatic, intelligent man in a brutal era, albeit with considerable casteist baggage. Amit Shah was the leader of a pack that took pride in Gandhi's murder—a leader who found prestige in a racist political party that history will scoff at after the dust has settled. To take Shah seriously was one of the gravest errors of

Indian politics, for it implied that a populist, a Tadipaar should be taken seriously—that he deserved news shows and novels upon him instead of psychiatrists and prison wards.

However, that THE WEEK's platform was no more available to me, mattered not. Come sun, rain or snow, I knew I would publish this story, and I would publish it with such integrity, that when the hooked, snooty noses of my former colleagues perused through its naked details—their eyes, otherwise cold, now aflame with envy—they would know the high price of missing out on this boat.

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11. The Caravan

IF there is one stretch of paved path that rivals the cars, honks, and abuses of Mumbai's highways, it is that cursed road connecting the Indira Gandhi International Airport to New Delhi.

I groaned along with the driver as his cab stop-started toward the capital like a frustrated centipede. My kada jumped from wrist to elbow, as fingers impatiently scratched pates. Worrisome beads of sweat formed in the northern chill. On paper, the associate editor's flat was less than half an hour away.

At this rate, we wouldn't be there till tomorrow.

After THE WEEK's inertia over Judge Loya's story became more and more apparent, I began venting my frustrations to my friends. After I handed in my resignation, I started sending feelers to other news agencies, confident of fate's smile instead of her middle finger.

At least Sidharth Bhatia, founder editor of The Wire, said

that he would not be able to carry the story, however curt his reply. The Hindu and Frontline did not even respond. Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, in response to one of our conversations, had assured me that if THE WEEK did not carry the story, Economic and Political Weekly would be happy to. But that was before he got into hot water over an Adani Group article, before he resigned as EPW's Editor.

Another journalist who melted his wings.

My mind was oddly clear, even if options were running out. If the government was tapping every call and using thugs for chor-police games whenever I left town, I had to assume end days were coming. I had to assume each stroll around a garden, each supply run at a supermarket or each last-minute road trip to Kolhapur was my last.

Which was why, before my assumptions became a reality, I had to document this investigation. If my skin was fated to be nailed on the walls of some saffron freak, so be it. But at least it shall be after I aired their dirty laundry.

As the cab continued to move along the highway like an aged snail, the previous evening's call replayed in my head.

"Hello, am I speaking to Niranjan Takle?"

"This is he."

"Hi Niranjan, my name is Vinod Jose. I am Executive Editor of The Caravan."

"Yes, Vinod sir. How can I help you?"

"There is a story you want publishing?"

I paused.

"There is. How did you hear of it?"

"Paranjoy mentioned it to us. Listen, I'll be honest. Would you mind coming over to New Delhi? And would you mind if we

carried it?"

I did not hesitate. "Buy a flight ticket for me, and I'll be there first thing tomorrow."

*

It was, in truth, a modest little home, a home that deserved little description—just your reasonable little 1 BHK perched on the first floor of a residential colony, somewhere in the spitting distance of IIT Delhi. But historical tales of a place often precede the place itself. It is sheer action that anoints it with its flavour, aura, and sense of grandeur.

That day, Vinod sir, Hartosh Singh Bal, staff writer Atul Dev, an associate editor, a reporter and a cameraman and I acted—and, for my money at least, created something special.

It began when Vinod sir assembled everyone in the sitting room. I was introduced to the staff members, editors and the cameraman. I handed each person two stapled copies of my unpublished draft. Vinod sir skimmed through it. He scratched his head—balder than an egg—and immediately handed me the spotlight.

"Paranjoy has told us next to nothing about the story, except for the punchline. So, before we begin, Hartosh and I would like to know everything. How did you stumble on the story? Where did you go? How long did the investigation take?"

I looked at him. Vinod had kind eyes, a perfectly ordinary voice and a humble aura. You could tell him his house was on fire, and his brows would not betray fury or fear. Indeed, on a random afternoon at a café, he was exactly the guy whose ear you would talk off.

And I did.

I spoke of that morning at Hotel Royalty, of Nupur and

Anuradha Biyani, Anuj Loya, Harkishanji, Dnyanesh Jathar and V.S. Jayaschandran, the Gategaon police officers, the memories of Nagpur that should rather have remained as nightmares.

As a consumer, I love The Caravan. Its long form of narrative reportage has filled a gaping hole in Indian journalism that has existed for too long. But today, I found out first-hand why their product was so consistently excellent. For, in those two hours, not only did Vinod and Hartosh sir listen like cats, but they also grilled me with all the right questions. The stark contrasts between them, R. Prasannan and Sachidananda Murthy was clearer than crystal.

The romance which reality kept suppressing whenever I saw THE WEEK's building at Kochi, came roaring back.

Hartosh Singh Bal, political editor and third-in-command of The Caravan, was a burly man with stern eyes, a bossy, unkempt beard and a no-nonsense booming voice, which mirrored his approach—the polar opposite of Dnyanesh.

After I was finished, he spoke.

"We have a story here, but it needs more. Who booked the Duronto Express in the first place? What really happened at Ravi Bhavan? Who was the ambulance driver? Where did it go from the G.M.C.? Who was the working staff on the day? Who is this maiyatacha chulatbhau? I'm also pretty sure a law in Maharashtra states that any person's post-mortem must be photographed and videoed. How do we follow up with that?"

"As of now, there is still more than enough to carry," Vinod sir said.

"I don't dispute that. And we will, after proper legal vetting and fact-checking of Niranjan's sources. If he is okay with it?"

You had me at legal vetting, I thought, nodding. THE WEEK was centuries away from this kind of professionalism.

Hartosh sir continued.

"I am, however, also thinking of the future. There will be uproar, especially in the judicial sector. The conspirators will panic. The family will panic. People will want to know more. We should assign a team that follows up; that verifies and tries to answer these questions everyone will have. Niranjan, how about you lead this team?"

"I'm too familiar a face to Maharashtra. No one at Nagpur will tell me a word once this story is out. But I can give you contacts. Every night, I typed out my diary's notes, which had quotes from all my sources, including those we can't include. It's a lot of information. Feel free to vet the data, use them as leads and look for more story angles."

"Excellent," Vinod sir smiled. "And now, let's work."

For the rest of the day, we wrote like men possessed. Atul Dev and I transcribed all the interviews into English. As I wrote the article, we all argued over each clause—the difference between 'told' and 'informed', 'stated' and 'alleged', and so on.

Their attention to detail pushed me to be better.

I also reformatted the entire draft into first person perspective, which I wasn't allowed at THE WEEK. This was always my preference. I wanted to own the story, but I also wanted to send a subliminal message to those with vested interests. If they knew I went to Meditrina and Gategaon, that I spoke to Harkishanji, that I uncovered suspicious medical documents, they would know that I had cold proof.

Show a fascist that you have no fear…

At 1:30 a.m., when I retired to the hotel room Vinod sir had booked for me, and the Delhi winter finally evaporated my beads of sweat, I realized that my sweaty impatience was over.

*

Anant Nath's square spectacles always dominated his thin, clean-shaven and intellectual face, which was otherwise eternally contorted in serious thought.

The morning after my best rest in months, I headed to Hartosh sir's home. Him, Vinod, Atul, the others and I went through the draft again, clause-by-clause. We made minor revisions and green-lit the rest. Not long after, we met Anant sir, Editor of The Caravan and Director of Delhi Press.

"I want to talk to you," he said, looking at me.

Moments later, we were out for a stroll on the lawn, with chole bature in our bellies. I kept telling Vinod that I wanted to be employed at The Caravan, which was why I knew exactly what this conversation was about.

"How's your family?" he asked.

"They're well. I have a wife and daughter. They don't know about this investigation. My father passed away earlier this year. There's not much else to add."

"Okay. I hear you were an engineer for nearly a decade. After that, you made the switch to journalism. Why so? What changed?"

"I'm not sure. When I was a boy, I wanted to be a lawyer. Somewhere along the way, things diverted. Every middle-class family nudges their child into medical or engineering, as you'd know. I was grateful for my engineering days. I saw the telecom revolution happen first-hand. But that boy who wanted to be a lawyer, who wanted to fight for truth, never really died. It's partly why I quit THE WEEK."

Anant Nath made smart, even strides on the lush grass.

"Legal vetting, fact-checking—this will all take a week,

maybe more. I promise you we will run this story. But have you given any thought on what happens after this, after Loya? What would you want to do next?"

"Exactly what I'm doing. Pursue investigative journalism."

"Is this your biggest story ever?"

"My biggest yet."

"I'll tell you what. Our magazine has an annual budget timing of April-March. In April, we allocate our monetary resources. You mentioned to Vinod that you would like a job here. After we adjust our budget for your salary, we will employ you from April. Is that okay?"

"Of course."

Beside us, the tall, maroon walls of India Habitat Centre watched over like a fatherly banyan tree.

*

It is, I think, a perfectly reasonable supposition that every human being under the sun is universally capable of feeling that nasty, potent sense of injustice—that vague concoction of anger, hatred, dismay, disbelief, and betrayal—whenever it rears its malicious, horned head. I like to think of that sense as energy which, like all forms of energy, can be put to productive use. Rage which settles inside the stomach and explodes after months of being bottled helps no one. A passive-aggressive comment or spiteful rant that follows the feeling of betrayal wastes everyone's time, including the betrayed.

When it came to Judge Brijgopal Harkishan Loya, my sense of injustice—my anger, dismay, and the rest—ignited at Hotel Royalty. Of course, I had felt this feeling before, and thus treated it as no other. Therefore, the coping mechanism of

extensive outputs (mind-maps, diary notes, transcriptions and whatnot), came to full effect. However, out of the widowed women, perverted ideologues, suicidal farmers, cattle extortionists, onion mafias, fake-encounters and scams worth crores, this sense of injustice was different. No matter how much I thought, wrote, or strategized, it refused to be treated.

For the life of me, I still cannot specify what was so personal about this story. It could have been Nupur's spiel, young Anuj's letter that I still cannot suppress, Harkishanji's tears, Dr. P's disappearance from Nagpur, or a mix of all of these. It could have been a goddamn mid-life crisis.

All I know is that, over the next year and a half, that sense simmered, rose like angry water, and boiled over when I resigned from THE WEEK.

On 15th November, THE WEEK officially relieved me. Jayas sir sent me an email. He was very polite and professional, telling me what a big loss I would be. He even promised to carry the pending cow vigilante story. Eventually, he did not, yet I felt no acrimony.

Because I also knew that, twenty-four hours after rewriting the story in New Delhi, my sense of anger and betrayal was gone.

I had done my duty. The rest was up to India.

After 10th November, while The Caravan vetted the story, Hartosh sir requested me to follow up on some leads. I went snooping around Nagpur at his request, but accomplished very little, since I was a known face. I then went to Pune, where S.M. Modak was now Principal Judge. His P.A. was an idiot who blindly handed me an appointment, but his security guard was not.

"I have been told to not let you in."

There was no point protesting or persuading. Were I not

red-flagged in Gategaon and Nagpur, and had I not sent Amit Shah and Mohit Shah questions about Loya's murder, perhaps he would have let me inside. But spilled milk was spilled milk.

I was, however, glad to have heeded Hartosh sir's advice. It led me to two new members of Judge Loya's family on camera.

On 18th November, two days before my fiftieth birthday, I drove down to Aurangabad along with Jayant Sonawane, Manas Pagar, Kiran Phokmare and another friend named Sagar Salunke. The aim was to interview Harkishan Loya. Sagar was from Aurangabad and knew where he was staying. Apparently, Harkishanji had moved to Aurangabad to stay with Sarita Mandhane. Sarita was Judge Loya's sister.

Kiran was my photojournalist, Jayant was Nupur's friend to vouch for me, and Manas was keen to help after Kopardi, and after my resignation. Sagar waited downstairs with the car, while the four of us were welcomed by Sarita, Harkishanji and Judge Loya's mother.

It was, as expected, a typical middle-class flat on the second floor of a residential complex. Aside from the afternoon light wafting from the window, the sitting room was both static and dark. Jayant, Kiran, Manas and I all sat on a wooden bench.

"Anuradha called and asked us to talk to you," Sarita told me. She wore a yellow sari, thick spectacles and looked very much like her sister.

"Yes," I replied. "I met her and Harkishanji long ago. You should know that I have resigned from THE WEEK magazine where I was working for many years. They refused to publish this story, saying that there is nothing in it. Now, I am publishing this next week in a much more credible magazine. It's called The Caravan and is based in Delhi."

"I had told you earlier," Harkishanji pointed out, "that I

won't speak on record until you gather evidence. We are extremely concerned for our grandchildren."

At the mention of grandchildren, the mood of the room changed. Even Judge Loya's mother, who flat-out refused to be interviewed, stared intently at me from the threshold between the kitchen and living room.

"I have proof," I said. "I have your son's post-mortem report, histopathology report, forensic report, forensic recommendation report and records of Ravi Bhavan. I spoke to many experts in the medical field. They all conclude that this was a murder."

This was news to him, but he maintained his poise and asked about Jayant, Manas and Kiran. I formally introduced them to the Loyas, and brought up the fact that Jayant and Nupur were schoolmates. Harkishanji, now a little more relaxed, asked Sarita to make us chai. He made hearty conversation with my garrulous friends and made them feel welcome. I sat in silence, not interrupting. What must this man feel, talking to people who were not even a third of his age—full of youth, full of life, full of ideals? Did he share their ideals, or were they crushed after his son's murder?

When Sarita came with chai, Harkishanji looked at his wife. "You don't worry. Niranjan is also like our son. He even left his job for our cause."

With his permission, Kiran meticulously set up the tripod. Jayant and Manas also began recording from their cell phones, from the sides. I had requested them to do this, since I wanted proof that the interview was taken voluntarily, and not by hidden cameras.

Harkishanji sat upright, as always, ready to be interviewed. At the last moment, Sarita Mandhane chipped in: "I

will also speak."

We began recording. I asked them about the events of 1 December, 2014.

"I was at my sister's place in Latur city," Sarita said. "Her son was hospitalized. Our father had stayed overnight in the hospital with him. We received a call early in the morning, between 5-5:30, informing us about Brij's death. We were asked to come to Nagpur as soon as possible. We immediately got ready and went to the hospital to pick up our father."

"I was shattered when I heard it," Harkishanji said. "It was like an earthquake. We came down and were about to get in the car to go to Nagpur."

"But that's when that man came there at the hospital," Sarita said. "He was a friend of Brij: Ishwar Baheti. He lives in Latur. He told us that he's been in touch with the doctors and other judges in Nagpur throughout the night. He told us that he's arranging for Brij's body to be brought to Gategaon, when the post-mortem is over."

Ishwar Baheti. That name again.

"How did this Ishwar know that Judge Loya died in Nagpur?" I asked. "Who was he in touch with? How did he even know that you were in that particular hospital at 6 a.m.?"

Sarita shrugged.

"We did not realize these issues then. Only later all these questions came to mind. In fact, Ishwar took us to his house at Latur, instead of us returning to my sister's house. He offered us snacks and tea and stayed around us till late evening. After that, he took us all to Gategaon in the night."

To me, it sounded like Ishwar Baheti was told to keep an eye on them.

"None of us were in the state of mind to decide anything," Sarita continued. "We were scared, extremely sad, confused and angry also. And... the entire village had gathered. Everyone loved Brij."

"We were waiting... just waiting. For Anuradha, Sharmila and the kids to reach. I wanted the earth to swallow me," Harkishanji said.

They began crying. Judge Loya's mother went inside the kitchen, where we could hear her sobbing as well. The four of us shared grave glances. Manas was on the verge of tears. Sarita took a deep breath.

"Sir, what will happen if you bring this to light? Can we get justice?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I don't want to regret that I never tried for justice to be delivered. I know enough about Judge Loya, to know that his soul must be expecting me to do my duty. So, I will do all I can."

"I have lived my life and I am not scared," Harkishanji repeated himself, "but we are all worried for the children."

"Nothing will happen," I said. "Just don't isolate yourself from the media and people. Stay in the public limelight. That will ensure your safety."

We went back to the interview.

"What happened after... the ambulance came?"

Sarita smiled weakly.

"You didn't say 'dead body' but ambulance. That's very kind. Anyway, it was all commotion and crying. No judge was with Brij, only the driver. Anuradha and my uncle noticed a wound on the back of his head. We found spectacles under his neck. My sister wanted a second post-mortem, but Baheti rejected her suggestion. He said that we should not do anything that will endanger our children...

especially after seeing what happened to Brij."

I was aghast.

"Does this mean that he knew that something 'happened' to Judge Loya? That something would happen to children?"

"Sir, we are simple and straight people. We didn't think of these questions at the time. In fact, someone had even stopped local journalists from coming to Gategaon."

"Yes," Harkishanji said. "That, too, we found out much later."

They spoke about the funeral. Sarita mentioned how their house was flooded with people, relatives and friends of Judge Loya for several days. They mentioned the fact that Ishwar Baheti handed over Judge Loya's two mobile phones after a few days, with its data erased.

"But I must tell you this," she ended. "When we returned to Aurangabad after all the rituals, there was a letter on the floor. It was behind the main door. It was probably pushed inside from under the door. The letter was unnamed. It said... Brij was poisoned. It also described a lot of things; how Brij attended the wedding in the morning. How he later met his friend and a fellow Judge in late afternoon. The letter said that we must demand an investigation... and if we don't, the letter-writer will assume that we are also involved."

"Oh my God," I said. "Where is it?"

"I gave the letter to Anuj," she said. "But he was so scared that he straightaway burnt it."

By the time the interview ended, nearly two hours had passed. Kiran, Manas and Jayant switched off their cameras. I touched the feet of Judge Loya's parents, and asked for blessings. While I was chatting with Sarita, Harkishanji slipped downstairs,

where Sagar was waiting for us in my car.

When the four of us came down, Sagar gave me a shifty glance. "Sir," he said, pointing at Harkishanji, "he has noted down your car number."

I smiled, and bade Judge Loya's father farewell.

"Tula Yama nenar," Harkishanji replied, his parting words of horror.

Death will take you.

*

Jayant's friend Jockey was tall, incredibly lanky, and wore a loose T-shirt and jeans. He greeted us at the door while scratching hair that descended to his shoulders.

Jockey's day job was as a web designer, but he looked the perfect archetype of what he also was: an ethical hacker.

Around midnight, the four of us had reached his rented apartment in Warje, Pune, at the end of a long and tiring drive from Aurangabad. We rode through the ghats, potholed roads and a two-hour traffic jam on the Aurangabad-Pune highway. I was too busy ensuring that no Bolero or Qualis cars tailed us, to note that my friends were quieter than the night.

Jockey stayed with his roommate, whom none of us knew and had no business with. My business was only with the tech guru.

"I need to transfer two interviews via a secure network. It is around one and a half hours of video. These videos are very important and cannot be intercepted. Can I count on you?"

"Easy! Don't worry."

From his grin, I could tell that he knew what he was doing.

Because of the VPN, each second of the interview took one second in real-time to be uploaded. When both videos were finally

transferred, it was 5:30 in the morning.

I had earned some shut-eye.

Two hours later, I awoke to find that Manas Pagar hadn't slept the night. I asked him if something was wrong. He said he wasn't tired, even though he hadn't slept a wink in the car. I took his help for transcribing work. Hartosh sir had told me that legal vetting was nearly over, and that he had also received Harkishanji and Sarita's interview. They were, however, in Marathi, which meant that they needed translation along with transcription.

Even with Manas's help, this took me all afternoon.

"After finishing this, I'll drop you guys and go home," I told my Punekar friends, as I attached the transcribed file for Hartosh sir. Jayant agreed.

"Why sir? No need for that," Kiran Phokmare said casually. "It's your birthday tomorrow! Come, we'll give you company."

"It's alright. Some work might come up with the story anyway."

"Sir, no," Manas said firmly. "We are coming with you. Let's not take any chances. What if something happens to you on the way?"

I was annoyed at his watery eyes.

"Arey, so what? What will you do? If they come to kill me, it's not like you can do anything!"

Incensed, Manas Pagar picked up a glass bottle and shattered it against a desk. He brandished the shards in front of us. We were all startled.

"If they touch you, I will kill the scoundrels!"

"Manas, what use is a bottle against a bullet?!"

"I've hit people before! Ask anyone! I've hit goons in Nashik with broken bottles, like this one!"

"They aren't going to ask for your qualifications before trying to kill me! Think clearly! They killed a CBI Special Court Judge, and no one could do anything. You of all people should know this!"

"Sir, you also saw how Judge Loya's father was crying! I had no idea the story was so serious. What if something happens to you…?"

He broke into full-blown tears.

"Manas, your tears will make me weak, not strong. If you cry, I'll start saving you and not care for myself."

"I have not seen anything like this in my life…"

I hugged him like he was my boy.

"Be my strength," I repeated, "not my weakness."

We swept up the shards, profusely apologized to Jockey and travelled to Cotton Green together. Now that the videos and transcriptions were securely uploaded, I felt little fear. Even so, my two friendly bodyguards kept keen eyes out for trouble. I felt like their babysitter at times, but I would rather have overly anxious friends than friends who did not care.

Even after we reached Cotton Green, Manas and Kiran were reticent to let me out of the house. Which was why, on the eve of my fiftieth birthday, we stayed indoors, drowned our anxieties with Blenders Pride and partied the night.

I awoke, the next morning, to a ringing phone. Hartosh Singh Bal was on the line.

"Many happy returns, Niranjan. Your birthday gift is on The Caravan's website."

Minutes later, it was my turn to cry.

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12. 'A Family Breaks Its Silence...'

BELOW are the two articles which The Caravan carried under my name. These reports are also available on caravanmagazine.in. After this, subsequent investigations regarding Judge Loya's death were written by Atul Dev, Nikita Saxena, etc. Their findings, along with mine, will be summarized in Chapter 14: 'The Evidence, Explained'.

These, however, were the two initial articles that caused national and international furore. It would be thorough to read them first.

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1. A Family Breaks Its Silence: Shocking details emerge in death of judge presiding over Sohrabuddin trial

-Niranjan Takle, 20 November 2017, The Caravan

On the morning of 1 December 2014, the family of 48-year-old judge Brijgopal Harkishan Loya, who was presiding over

the Central Bureau of Investigation special court in Mumbai, was informed that he had died in Nagpur, where he had travelled for a colleague's daughter's wedding. Loya had been hearing one of the most high-profile cases in the country, involving the allegedly staged encounter killing of Sohrabuddin Sheikh in 2005. The prime accused in the case was Amit Shah—Gujarat's minister of state for home at the time of Sohrabuddin's killing, and the Bharatiya Janata Party's national president at the time of Loya's death. The media reported that the judge had died of a heart attack.

Loya's family did not speak to the media after his death. But in November 2016, Loya's niece, Nupur Balaprasad Biyani, approached me while I was visiting Pune to say she had concerns about the circumstances surrounding her uncle's death. Following this, over several meetings between November 2016 and November 2017, I spoke to her mother, Anuradha Biyani, who is Loya's sister and a medical doctor in government service; another of Loya's sisters, Sarita Mandhane; and Loya's father, Harkishan. I also tracked down and spoke to government servants in Nagpur who witnessed the procedures followed with regard to the judge's body after his death, including the post-mortem.

From these accounts, deeply disturbing questions emerged about Loya's death: questions about inconsistencies in the reported account of the death; about the procedures followed after his death; and about the condition of the judge's body when it was handed over to the family. Though the family asked for an inquiry commission to probe Loya's death, none was ever set up.

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At 11 pm on 30 November 2014, from Nagpur, Loya phoned his wife, Sharmila, using his mobile phone. Over around 40 minutes, he described to her his busy schedule through the day. Loya was in Nagpur to attend the wedding of the daughter of a fellow judge, Sapna Joshi. Initially he had not intended to go, but

two of his fellow judges had insisted that he accompany them. Loya told his wife that he had attended the wedding, and later attended a reception. He also enquired about his son, Anuj. He said that he was staying at Ravi Bhavan, a government guest house for VIPs in Nagpur's Civil Lines locality, along with the judges he had accompanied to Nagpur.

It was the last call that Loya is known to have made, and the last conversation that he is known to have had. His family received the news of his death early the next morning.

"His wife in Mumbai, myself in Latur city and my daughters in Dhule, Jalgaon and Aurangabad received calls," early on the morning of 1 December 2014, Harkishan Loya, the judge's father, told me when we first met, in November 2016, in his native village of Gategaon, near Latur city. They were informed "that Brij passed away in the night, that his post-mortem was over and his body had been sent to our ancestral home in Gategaon, in Latur district," he added. "I felt like an earthquake had shattered my life."

The family was told that Loya had died of a cardiac arrest. "We were told that he had chest pain, and so was taken to Dande Hospital, a private hospital in Nagpur, by auto rickshaw, where some medication was provided," Harkishan said. Biyani, Loya's sister, described Dande Hospital as "an obscure place," and said that she "later learnt that the ECG"—the electrocardiography unit at the facility—"was not working." Later, Harkishan said, Loya "was shifted to Meditrina hospital"—another private hospital in the city—"where he was declared dead on arrival."

The Sohrabuddin case was the only one that Loya was hearing at the time of his death, and was one of the most carefully watched cases then underway in the country. In 2012, the Supreme Court had ordered that the trial in the case be shifted from Gujarat to Maharashtra, stating that it was "convinced that in order to

preserve the integrity of the trial it is necessary to shift it outside the State." The Supreme Court had also ordered that the trial be heard by the same judge from start to finish. But, in violation of this order, JT Utpat, the judge who first heard the trial, was transferred from the CBI special court in mid 2014, and replaced by Loya.

On 6 June 2014, Utpat had reprimanded Amit Shah for seeking exemption from appearing in court. After Shah failed to appear on the next date, 20 June, Utpat fixed a hearing for 26 June. The judge was transferred on 25 June. On 31 October 2014, Loya, who had allowed Shah the exemption, asked why Shah had failed to appear in court despite being in Mumbai on that date. He set the next date of hearing for 15 December.

Loya's death on 1 December was reported only in a few routine news articles the next day, and did not attract significant media attention. The Indian Express, while reporting that Loya had "died of a heart attack" noted, "Sources close to him said that Loya had sound medical history." The media attention picked up briefly on 3 December, when MPs of the Trinamool Congress staged a protest outside the parliament, where the winter session was under way, to demand an inquiry into Loya's death. The next day, Sohrabuddin's brother, Rubabuddin, wrote a letter to the CBI, expressing his shock at Loya's death.

Nothing came of the MPs' protests, or Rubabuddin's letter. No follow-up stories appeared on the circumstances surrounding Loya's death.

Over numerous conversations with Loya's family members, I pieced together a chilling description of what Loya went through while presiding over the Sohrabuddin trial, and of what happened following his death. Biyani also gave me copies of a diary she said she maintains regularly, which included entries from the days preceding and following her brother's death. In

these, she noted many aspects of the incident that disturbed her. I also reached out to Loya's wife and son, but they declined to speak, saying that they feared for their lives.

Biyani, who is based in Dhule, told me that she received a call on the morning of 1 December 2014 from someone identifying himself as a judge named Barde, who told her to travel to Gategaon, some 30 kilometres from Latur, where Loya's body was sent. The same caller also informed Biyani and other members of the family that a post-mortem had been conducted on the body, and that the cause of death was a heart attack.

Loya's father normally resides in Gategaon, but was in Latur at the time, at the house of one of his daughters. He, too, received a phone call, telling him his son's body would be moved to Gategaon. "Ishwar Baheti, an RSS worker, had informed father that he would arrange for the body to reach Gategaon," Biyani told me. "Nobody knows why, how and when he came to know about the death of Brij Loya."

Sarita Mandhane, another of Loya's sisters, who runs a tuition centre in Aurangabad and was visiting Latur at the time, told me that she received a call from Barde at around 5 am, informing her that Loya had died. "He said that Brij has passed away in Nagpur and asked us to rush to Nagpur," she said. She set out to pick up her nephew from a hospital in Latur where he had earlier been admitted, but "just as we were leaving the hospital, this person, Ishwar Baheti, came there. I still don't know how he came to know that we were at Sarda Hospital." According to Mandhane, Baheti said that he had been talking through the night with people in Nagpur, and insisted that there was no point in going to Nagpur since the body was being sent to Gategaon from there in an ambulance. "He took us to his house, saying that he will coordinate everything," she said. (Questions that I sent to Baheti were still unanswered at the time this story was published.)

It was night by the time Biyani reached Gategaon—the other sisters were already at the ancestral home by then. The body was delivered at around 11.30 pm, after Biyani's arrival, according to an entry in her diary. To the family's shock, none of Loya's colleagues had accompanied his body on the journey from Nagpur. The only person accompanying the body was the ambulance driver. "It was shocking," Biyani said. "The two judges who had insisted that he travel to Nagpur for the marriage had not accompanied him. Mr Barde, who informed the family of his death and his post-mortem, had not accompanied him. This question haunts me: why was his body not accompanied by anyone?" One of her diary entries reads, "He was a CBI court judge, he was supposed to have security and he deserved to be properly accompanied."

Loya's wife, Sharmila, and his daughter and son, Apurva and Anuj, travelled to Gategaon from Mumbai, accompanied by a few judges. One of them "was constantly telling Anuj and the others not to speak to anybody," Biyani told me. "Anuj was of course sad and scared, but he maintained his poise and kept supporting his mother."

Biyani recounted that when she saw the body, she felt that something was amiss. "There were bloodstains on the neck at the back of the shirt," she told me. She added that his "spectacles were below the neck." Mandhane told me that Loya's spectacles were "stuck under his body."

A diary entry by Biyani from the time reads, "There was blood on his collar. His belt was twisted in the opposite direction, and the pant clip is broken. Even my uncle feels that this is suspicious." Harkishan told me, "There were bloodstains on the clothes." Mandhane said that she, too, saw "blood on the neck." She said that "there was blood and an injury on his head ... on the back side," and that "his shirt had blood spots." Harkishan said,

"His shirt had blood on it from his left shoulder to his waist."

But in the post-mortem report, issued by the Government Medical College Hospital in Nagpur, under a category described as "Condition of the clothes—whether wet with water, stained with blood or soiled with vomit or foecal matter," a handwritten entry reads, simply, "Dry."

Biyani found the state of the body suspicious because, as a doctor, "I know that blood does not come out during PM"—post-mortem—"since the heart and lungs don't function." She said that she demanded a second post-mortem, but that Loya's gathered friends and colleagues "discouraged us, telling us not to complicate the issue more."

The family was tense and scared, but was forced to carry out Loya's funeral, Harkishan said.

Legal experts suggest that if Loya's death was deemed suspicious—the fact that a post-mortem was ordered suggests that it was—a panchnama should have been prepared, and a medico-legal case should have been filed. "As per legal procedure, the police department is expected to collect and seal all the personal belongings of the deceased, list them all in a panchnama and hand them over to the family as they are," Asim Sarode, a senior Pune-based lawyer, told me. Biyani said the family was not given any copy of a panchnama.

Loya's mobile phone was returned to the family, but, Biyani said, it was returned by Baheti, and not by the police. "We got his mobile on the third or fourth day," she said. "I had asked for it immediately. It had information about his calls and all that happened. We would have known about it if we got it. And the SMSes. Just one or two days before this news, a message had come which said, 'Sir, stay safe from these people.' That SMS was on the phone. Everything was deleted from it."

Biyani had numerous questions about the events of the night of Loya's death and the following morning. Among them was that of how and why Loya had been taken to hospital in an auto rickshaw, when the auto stand nearest to Ravi Bhavan is around two kilometres away from it. "There is no auto rickshaw stand near Ravi Bhavan, and people do not get auto rickshaws near Ravi Bhavan even during the day," Biyani said. "How did the men accompanying him manage to get an auto rickshaw at midnight?"

Other questions, too, remain unanswered. Why was the family not informed when Loya was taken to hospital? Why were they not informed as soon as he died? Why were they not asked for approval of a post-mortem, or informed that one was to be performed, before the procedure was carried out? Who recommended the post-mortem, and why? What was suspicious about Loya's death to cause a post-mortem to be recommended? What medication was administered to him at Dande Hospital? Was there not a single vehicle in Ravi Bhavan—which regularly hosts VIPs, including ministers, IAS and IPS officers and judges—available to ferry Loya to hospital? The winter session of the Maharashtra state assembly was to begin in Nagpur on 7 December, and hundreds of officials usually arrive in the city well in advance of assembly sessions for the preparations. Who were the other VIPs staying in Ravi Bhavan on 30 November and 1 December? "These all are very valid questions," Sarode, the lawyer, said. "Why was the report of the medication administered at Dande hospital not given to the family? Will the answers to these questions create problems for someone?"

Questions such as these "still keep bothering the family, friends and relatives," Biyani said.

It added to their confusion that the judges who had insisted that Loya travel to Nagpur did not visit the family for "one or one and a half months" after his death, she said. It was only then that

the family heard their account of Loya's last hours. According to Biyani, the two men told the family that Loya experienced chest pain at around 12.30 am, that they then took him to Dande Hospital in an auto rickshaw, and that there, "he climbed the stairs himself and some medication was administered. He was taken to Meditrina hospital where he was declared dead on arrival."

Even after this, many questions were left unanswered. "We did try to get the details of the treatment administered in Dande Hospital, but the doctors and the staff there simply refused to divulge any details," Biyani said.

I accessed the report of Loya's post-mortem, conducted at the Government Medical College Hospital in Nagpur. The document raises several questions of its own.

Every page of the post-mortem report is signed by the senior police inspector of Sadar police station, Nagpur, and by someone who signed with the phrase "maiyatacha chulatbhau"—or the paternal cousin brother of the deceased. This latter person is supposed to have received the body after the post-mortem examination. "I do not have any brother or paternal cousin brother in Nagpur," Loya's father said. "Who signed on the report is another unanswered question."

Further, the report states that the corpse was sent from Meditrina Hospital to the Government Medical College Hospital by the Sitabardi police station, Nagpur, and that it was brought in by a police constable named Pankaj, of Sitabardi police station, whose badge number is 6238. It notes that the body was brought in at 10.50 am on 1 December 2014, that the post-mortem began at 10.55 am, and that it was over at 11.55 am.

The report also noted that, as per the police, Loya "died on 1/12/14 at 0615 hours" after experiencing "chest pains at 0400 am." It stated, "He was brought to Dande hospital first and then

shifted to Meditrina hospital where he was declared to be in dead condition."

The time of death cited in the report—6.15 am—appears incongruous, since, according to Loya's family members, they began receiving calls about his death from 5 am onwards. Further, during my investigation, two sources in Nagpur's Government Medical College and Sitabardi police station told me they had been informed of Loya's death by midnight, and had personally seen the dead body during the night. They also said that the post-mortem was done shortly after midnight. Apart from the calls that the family received, the sources' accounts also raise serious questions about the post-mortem report's claim that the time of death was 6.15 am.

The source at the medical college, who was privy to the post-mortem examination, also told me that he knew that there had been instructions from superiors to "cut up the body as if the PM was done and stitch it up."

The report mentions "coronary artery insufficiency" as the probable cause of death. According to the renowned Mumbai-based cardiologist Hasmukh Ravat, "Usually old age, family history, smoking, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes are the causes for such coronary artery insufficiency." Biyani pointed out that none of these were applicable to her brother. "Brij was 48," she said. "Our parents are 85 and 80 years old, and are healthy with no cardiac history. He was always a teetotaller, played table tennis for two hours a day for years, had no diabetes or blood pressure."

Biyani told me that she found the official medical explanation for her brother's death hard to believe. "I am a doctor myself, and Brij used to consult me even for minor complaints such as acidity or cough," she said. "He had no cardiac history and no one from our family has it."

2. Chief Justice Mohit Shah offered Rs 100 crore to my brother for a favourable judgment in the Sohrabuddin case: Late Judge Loya's sister

- Niranjan Takle, 21 November 2017, The Caravan

Brijgopal Harkishan Loya, the judge presiding over the CBI special court in Mumbai, died sometime between the night of 30 November and the early morning of 1 December 2014, while on a trip to Nagpur. At the time of his death, he was hearing the Sohrabuddin case, in which the prime accused was the Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah. The media reported at the time that Loya had died of a heart attack. But my investigations between November 2016 and November 2017 raised disturbing questions about the circumstances surrounding Loya's death—including questions regarding the condition of his body when it was handed over to his family.

Among those I spoke to was one of Loya's sisters, Anuradha Biyani, a medical doctor based in Dhule, Maharashtra. Biyani made an explosive claim to me: Loya, she said, confided to her that Mohit Shah, then the chief justice of the Bombay High Court, had offered him a bribe of Rs 100 crore in return for a favourable judgment. She said Loya had told her this some weeks before he died, when the family gathered for Diwali at their ancestral home in Gategaon. Loya's father Harkishan also told me that his son had told him he had offers to deliver a favourable judgment in exchange for money and a house in Mumbai.

Brijgopal Harkishan Loya was appointed to the special CBI court in June 2014, after his predecessor, JT Utpat, was transferred within weeks of reprimanding Amit Shah for seeking an exemption from appearing in court. According to a February 2015 report in Outlook, "During the CBI court's hearings that Utpat presided over for this one year, or even after, court records suggest Amit Shah had never turned up even once—including on

the final day of discharge. Shah's counsel apparently made oral submissions for exempting him from personal appearance on grounds ranging from him being 'a diabetic and hence unable to move' to the more blase: 'he is busy in Delhi.'"

The Outlook report continued: "On June 6, 2014, Utpat had made his displeasure known to Shah's counsel and, while allowing exemption for that day, ordered Shah's presence on June 20. But he didn't show up again. According to media reports, Utpat told Shah's counsel, 'Every time you are seeking exemption without giving any reason.'" Utpat, the story noted, "fixed the next hearing for June 26. But on 25th, he was transferred to Pune." This was in violation of a September 2012 Supreme Court order, that the Sohrabuddin trial "should be conducted from beginning to end by the same officer."

Loya had at first appeared well disposed towards Shah's request that he be exempted from personally appearing in court. As Outlook noted, "Utpat's successor Loya was indulgent, waiving Shah's personal appearance on each date." But this apparent indulgence may just have been a matter of procedure. According to the Outlook story, "significantly, one of his last notings stated that Shah was being exempted from personal appearance 'till the framing of charges.' Loya had clearly not harboured the thought of dropping charges against Shah even when he appeared to be gentle on him." According to the lawyer Mihir Desai, who represented Sohrabuddin's brother Rubabuddin—the complainant in the case—Loya was keen on scrutinising the entire chargesheet, which ran to more than 10,000 pages, and on examining the evidence and witnesses carefully. "The case was sensitive and important, and it was going to create and decide the reputation of Mr Loya as a judge," Desai said. "But the pressure was certainly mounting."

Nupur Balaprasad Biyani, a niece of Loya's who stayed

with his family in Mumbai while studying in the city, told me about the extent of the pressure she witnessed her uncle facing. "When he was coming from the court, he was like, 'bahut tension hai,'" she said. "Stress. It's a very big case. How to deal with it. Everyone is involved with it." Nupur said it was a question of "political values."

Desai told me, "The courtroom always used to be extremely tense. The defence lawyers used to insist on discharging Amit Shah of all the charges, while we were demanding for the transcripts of the calls, submitted as evidence by the CBI, to be provided in English." He pointed out that neither Loya nor the complainant understood Gujarati, the language on the tapes.

But the defence lawyers, Desai said, repeatedly brushed aside the demands for transcripts in English, and insisted that Shah's discharge petition be heard. Desai added that his junior lawyers often noticed unknown, suspicious-looking people inside the courtroom, whispering and staring at the complainant's lawyers in an intimidating manner.

Desai recounted that during a hearing on 31 October, Loya asked why Shah was absent. His lawyers pointed out that he had been exempted from appearance by Loya himself. Loya remarked that the exemption applied only when Shah was not in the state. That day, he said, Shah was in Mumbai to attend the swearing-in of the new BJP-led government in Maharashtra, and was only 1.5 kilometres away from the court. He instructed Shah's counsel to ensure his appearance when he was in the state, and set the next hearing for 15 December.

Anuradha Biyani told me that Loya confided in her that Mohit Shah, who served as the chief justice of the Bombay High Court between June 2010 and September 2015, offered Loya a bribe of Rs 100 crore for a favourable judgment. According to her, Mohit Shah "would call him late at night to meet in civil dress and

pressure him to issue the judgment as soon as possible and to ensure that it is a positive judgment." According to Biyani, "My brother was offered a bribe of 100 crore in return for a favourable judgment. Mohit Shah, the chief justice, made the offer himself."

She added that Mohit Shah told her brother that if "the judgment is delivered before 30 December, it won't be under focus at all because at the same time, there was going to be another explosive story which would ensure that people would not take notice of this."

Loya's father Harkishan also told me that his son had confided in him about bribe offers. "Yes, he was offered money," Harkishan said. "Do you want a house in Mumbai, how much land do you want, how much money do you want, he used to tell us this. This was an offer." But, he added, his son refused to succumb to the offers. "He told me I am going to turn in my resignation or get a transfer," Harkishan said. "I will move to my village and do farming."

I contacted Mohit Shah and Amit Shah for their responses to the family's claims. At the time this story was published, they had not responded. The story will be updated if and when they reply.

After Loya's death, MB Gosavi was appointed to the Sohrabuddin case. Gosavi began hearing the case on 15 December 2014. "He heard the defence lawyers argue for three days to discharge Amit Shah of all the charges, while the CBI, the prosecuting agency, argued for 15 minutes," Mihir Desai said. "He concluded the hearing on 17 December and reserved his order."

On 30 December, around one month after Loya's death, Gosavi upheld the defence's argument that the CBI had political motives for implicating the accused. With that, he discharged Amit Shah.

The same day, news of MS Dhoni's retirement from test cricket dominated television screens across the country. As Biyani recounted, "There was just a ticker at the bottom which said, 'Amit Shah not guilty. Amit Shah not guilty.'"

Mohit Shah visited the grieving family only around two and half months after Loya's death. From Loya's family, I obtained a copy of a letter that they said Anuj, Loya's son, wrote to his family on the day of the then chief justice's visit. It is dated 18 February 2015—80 days after Loya's death. Anuj wrote, "I fear that these politicians can harm any person from my family and I am also not powerful enough to fight with them." He also wrote, referring to Mohit Shah, "I asked him to set up an enquiry commission for dad's death. I fear that to stop us from doing anything against them, they can harm anyone of our family members. There is threat to our lives."

Anuj wrote twice in the letter that "if anything happens to me or my family, chief justice Mohit Shah and others involved in the conspiracy will be responsible."

When I met him in November 2016, Loya's father Harkishan said, "I am 85 and I am not scared of death now. I want justice too, but I am extremely scared for the life of my daughters and grandchildren." He had tears in his eyes as he spoke, and his gaze went often to the garlanded photograph of Loya hanging on the wall of the ancestral home.

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13. The Weeks After

BEFORE Hartosh Singh Bal's call, 20th November 2017 was panning out to be an ordinary birthday. It began at the crack of dawn, when Manas Pagar and Kiran Phokmare said they were finally returning to Pune. I thanked Kiran for his professionalism and Manas for his consistent company. The latter's outburst still rung in my ears: in the space of one and a half years, Manas had aged beyond his age.

Soon after, I headed to Dadar to pick up my wife, who had travelled to Mumbai on account of my birthday. We ate breakfast on the way and returned to Cotton Green. As she unpacked, I lied down and stared at the dull ceiling. Manas, Kiran, Jayant and even Jockey were on the forefront of my mind. They would soon be overcome by a peaceful slumber... only to be disturbed by Hartosh.

A Family Breaks Its Silence.

I read, then re-read the article on my phone.

It was incredible. The images, quotes, phrases and general narrative was all on point. The product of around eighteen months of labour was finally available to the public. My hands were shaking. I was in a daze. To publish the story on my birthday, The Caravan's team must have worked throughout the night.

"What happened?" my wife asked, suddenly startled.

"Why are you crying?"

It was too overwhelming to answer.

She sat next to me.

"Who had called? It is your birthday Niranjan. Don't cry."

I shook my head nonchalantly, although the desired effect was far from achieved. I wanted to tell her not to worry, but a single word failed to leave my mouth. Surely, today was supposed to be a happy day?

The phone slipped from my hand and fell on the bed when I hugged her and cried.

"It was Hartosh sir, Political Editor of The Caravan. He has given me the biggest birthday gift of my life. The story for which I left THE WEEK is finally published," I eventually said.

Then followed the lengthy recounting, like oceans of water thundering through a cracked dam. The Loyas, the politics at office, the pursuit from Osmanabad to Pune, the days and nights at Nagpur, the frenzied final stretch at Delhi and Aurangabad... all regrettably concealed from my partner of over twenty years.

She listened, as always, with supreme grace and silence.

The conversation broke when my phone rung. Nupur Biyani's name was flashing on the screen. After seeing her name, I was reminded of the two problems in the story: firstly, that the article said I met her in November 2016 (it was June), and secondly, that Nupur's name was even mentioned. I wanted her to

remain anonymous.

"Sir, I read the story just now," she said. "Thank you very much. But you have quoted aai, ajoba and maushi in the story."

"Yes," I said steadily. "They spoke to me on record. Their quotes authenticate the story, while other evidence substantiates their apprehensions. Don't worry at all."

At this point, Nupur was already in Australia, and therefore safe from retaliations. The rest of the Loya family, however, had every right to be frightened. Anuradha Biyani all but confirmed this when she called two minutes later.

"Sir, we just now read it," she said. "My husband and some relatives are panicked, as our names have appeared in the story. I don't know what to do."

"Do not go into isolation," I told her, as I told Harkishanji and Sarita Mandhane. "You can speak to the media if they contact you. But remain in the public domain, because it will ensure your safety. I can come and stay with you if you are feeling scared."

Anuradha was sobbing.

"Please don't worry," I repeated. "In fact, now you are safe as the story is published. Now it is me who needs to be more careful."

She cut the call. There was a knock on the door.

"Don't open it!" my wife shouted. Her eyes were wide open and her eyebrows were raised.

"What? There's someone outside! I cannot isolate myself from the world."

It was only Pratik Nandgaonkar, my neighbour.

"Sir," he said, "I read your story. I am going to stay with you for 24 hours—for as long as needed. Don't say no. I will ensure that you are safe."

Pratik's pledge, however, only panicked my wife further. It was hard to comfort her while I was simultaneously receiving calls. Jatin Desai, Dnyanesh Jathar and Advocate Mihir Desai congratulated me. Mugdha Karnik madam, a Director at Mumbai University, phoned with even better news.

"Niranjan, I have translated the report into Marathi and have posted it on Facebook. It is an amazing story!"

I was very thankful. Mugdha madam had previously translated books like The Fountainhead and Lord of the Rings in Marathi.

"Look!" I said, turning to my wife with an assured face. I had deliberately received these calls on speaker so that she could also hear their admiration. "There are all these great people who are so openly supporting my work."

She stared at me.

"None of these admirers will lose anything if you die. It will only be our daughter and I who will lose everything."

*

Pratik and I entered the head office of a bank at Churchgate where, on the second floor, senior journalist Paranjoy Guha Thakurta waited with a bouquet and two books.

I was in two minds about meeting Paranjoy. On the one hand, he was a senior editor, among the most reputed investigative journalists in India, and had also recommended my investigation to The Caravan. But on the other hand, I had frightened and angered my wife by leaving her alone at Cotton Green, at a point when the article and Mugdha madam's translation were going viral. On Facebook, too, thousands were wishing me about the investigation and my birthday.

"Are there more parts to the story?" Paranjoy asked, his

thin-rimmed spectacles veiling kindly, sage-like eyes. "The article ends by saying that there is more to come tomorrow."

"There is," I said guardedly, "The first part was about Judge Loya's family's doubts and questions regarding his death. The rest... will follow."

Paranjoy asked no more questions. His friend, a well-regarded figure in Indian politics, interrupted us with sandwiches and coffee.

"How is your family's reaction?"

"To be frank, my wife is shocked and panicked. My daughter is directing a play at her college tomorrow. She's busy, so I haven't had the chance to speak to her yet."

"Listen, keep your phone switched off for a few days."

"No way. The phone is my only source of contact with the outside world. I don't want to go into isolation. That can be more dangerous. I can, at the most, decide not to receive calls from unknown numbers. But I won't completely switch off my phone."

He also understood my position. Indeed, since morning, my phone was becoming extremely hot and the battery was draining within twenty minutes. The phone was obviously tapped, but I didn't tell Paranjoy's friend this. Instead, the three of us chatted about the story until it was time for Paranjoy to leave.

The journalist was replaced by a Congressman and renowned Marathi editor (and future Rajya Sabha member) Kumar Ketkar. I bowed to touch Ketkar sir's feet. He hugged and congratulated me instead.

"You can stay in my house with your wife in Shahpur for a few days, if you want to isolate," he offered. "Nobody will disturb you there."

"No need, sir," I replied, explaining my position again.

Ketkar sir may have noted that I was speaking for myself. He knew my wife personally, so he asked if she shared my bravery. I replied, sheepishly, in the negative.

"Tell her that the bullet is already fired," he said, beaming. "Now it is up to her and to you, to decide whether to receive it in the chest or the back!"

*

The entrance to the Press Club of Mumbai may be easy to miss, since it is dwarfed by popular landmarks like Azad Maidan, St. Xavier's College and Madam Cama Hospital. But the Club was an important cornerstone of my journalistic career in the city—a convenient spot for interviews, story-filing and unwinding with fellow veterans after long days. I was fortunate to be acquainted with the Club after senior journalists like Gurbir Singh relocated it from its original ramshackle Mhada building.

Indeed, it was Gurbir sir I had headed to meet, on his request.

Pratik and I found Gurbir in the seating lounge, chatting with Jatin Desai, several other journalists, and an office-bearer of the Club. I had immense respect for Gurbir and Jatin sir, both of whom were among the best human beings in Indian journalism. They eagerly welcomed Pratik and me.

The rest pretended that we did not exist.

"Now I see why you wanted to speak with Advocate Mihir Desai," Jatin sir said, smiling.

"It's an incredible story Niranjan. Congratulations," Gurbir sir added. "But the end of the article says that there is more to follow. What else have you uncovered about Judge Loya?"

"I'm sorry, I can't divulge anything until all the parts are carried out."

"Nevertheless, the scope and proportion of the story is huge. I think we should issue a statement in solidarity for you," Gurbir sir said, looking at the office-bearer.

"Why?" the bearer said. "Nothing has happened to him until now. We will hold a condolence meeting only if anything happens."

"Sir," Pratik suddenly whispered, "let's leave. Don't stay here for a moment."

He must have noticed that no one else was talking to us, but they were all talking about us, as if we were victims of smallpox. My wife's words were ringing truer and truer—the admirers and disparagers had nothing to lose.

*

21 November brought the second bombshell: Chief Justice Mohit Shah offering Rs. 100 crores to Judge Loya. Anuradha Biyani, the source for this news, rang my white-hot phone at 9:30 a.m.

"Sir… you have written everything. You can't imagine the pressure I'm under. All my relatives are calling and scaring me. Journalists from Delhi have also called."

She sounded extremely panicked.

"Talk to the reporters," I told her, holding the phone at a slight distance, so that the heat did not singe my ears. "Tell them everything that you told me. Please remember, your presence in the public domain is your safety."

Anuradha began crying. She hung up.

Nupur called seconds later.

"Sir, everyone is asking me to block you on Facebook. My husband is insisting. Is it okay if I do that? They're saying that none of us should have contact with you on social media. Aai is also

under a lot of pressure."

"No problem if you block me," I replied patiently. "You are in Australia, so you will be safe, but ask your mother to not isolate herself. It will be easy to pressurize the family if they remain isolated. Please—I will do everything to ensure your safety."

Nupur hung up.

I looked around the empty room and allowed myself a deep sigh. The Loyas were seriously worrying me. I couldn't blame them for their fear—after all, they were simple, rural folk in the centre of a national storm. But they also had a history of doing foolish things under pressure. They listened to Ishwar Baheti's conspicuous advices, they didn't make a ruckus about Brijgopal's bloodied shirt, and Anuj Loya even burned a letter that could have been evidence.

Thankfully, my wife was in the bathroom and didn't overhear the calls. Yesterday was a strained affair for us. When I had reached home from Mumbai Press Club, her face and nose was pink from crying. We had dinner near Horniman Circle, which only intensified the negative vibe because the area was deserted. She even asked if it was safe to attend our daughter's college play at St. Xavier's.

When it was time to sleep, she cried till the middle of the night.

Thankfully, she was much more composed after returning from the bathroom. She simply asked if the Mohit Shah allegation would invite a defamation suit (it wouldn't), and after that, didn't raise the issue at all. I spent the rest of that day with her—eating snacks, avoiding calls, watching our daughter's play, and eventually dropping her to the bus stop at Dadar.

During the day, I realized that I was quickly becoming the

point-man for the Loya family and my own. If I betrayed chinks in my armour, their panic would mutate into full-fledged hysteria. It was necessary to remain steadier than a rock... necessary to personify the stoic, Marathi manus.

*

On 24 November, three days after the Mohit Shah article broke, I trudged across Azad Maidan alone, with only my thoughts. At Abhay Mokashi sir's request, I had just returned from a two-hour lecture with some students of St. Xavier's.

The last three days were pure bedlam.

My two articles had been translated into twelve regional languages. The hashtag #ISupportNiranjanTakle was making rounds on Twitter. The judicial fraternity remained stubbornly silent. Mainstream newspapers, predictably, refused to report the stories. But Ravish Kumar—primetime anchor of NDTV India—did two shows on Judge Loya with such expertise, I shivered and cried when I saw them (he would later do a third).

Meanwhile, I was accused of being part of a Congress lobby, and of timing the story's release to manipulate the upcoming Gujarat elections. They didn't know that I wanted the reports published since March 2017. Another damaging rumour spread—that my interviews were misquoted, misinterpreted, or recorded by hidden cameras.

The day of my daughter's play, Anuradha Biyani called regarding that.

"Sir, I beg you not to release the videos. Please do something! Everyone here is very angry with me. I'm not bothered about others, but please don't release the videos," she said in a very shrill voice, before immediately disconnecting.

Hartosh sir immediately declined this request, since the rumours were too damaging. Snippets of Anuradha, Sarita and

Harkishanji's interviews were uploaded. They went viral as well.

My wife, now at Nashik, tried her utmost to show that she was alright, but her voice was betraying the truth. My daughter gave rock-solid support, but it was only much later that I found out she was also paranoid for her safety.

All this while, Pratik Nandgaonkar followed me like a silent shadow. He moved into my studio room at Cotton Green. Whenever my tapped phone ran out of charge, people called him to speak to me. Just yesterday, on 23 November, Manas called Pratik to talk to me.

"Sir," Manas said, "NCP's Chief Sharad Pawar wants to meet you. Please contact their treasurer, Hemant Takle, to get through to him."

I was surprised. Till now, the only politician who had tried to contact me regarding the investigation and my well-being was NCP's Jitendra Awhad. Now Pawar wanted to talk as well?

Minutes later, I was on the phone with Hemant Takle. Hemant also happened to be a distant relative.

"We were trying to contact you for two days," he said. "Your phone was always off. How are you? Pawar saheb wants to meet you at his office. Can you come to Y.B. Chavan Centre on the 25th, at 4 p.m.?"

Hemant sounded worried. Myself, I was thinking of Judge Loya's family, who were a hundred times more terrified than Hemant. I thought of the power of Pawar's voice in Maharashtra. If I convinced him to publicly speak in support of Loya's family, it would forge an unbreakable brand of fortitude.

Taklya. Taklya.

This was crucial. Dr. Biyani was the primary source for the allegation against Mohit Shah. She and Harkishanji also spoke

about the blood on Brijgopal's shirt. They needed to feel safe and protected.

Taklya!

Someone was calling me in Azad Maidan. I turned.

I received a punch on my forehead and fell.

Five guys were towering over me. They looked with angry eyes. It looked like they were just getting started. Where was Pratik when I needed him?

The sun was in my eyes. I stood up and dusted my pants.

"What's wrong?"

The person who punched me spoke. "Jyada shana banta hai kya? You think you're very clever?"

He tried to punch me again. Lessons from my boxing days at college immediately registered.

I blocked the punch, and turned to a gunda who matched me in size. If I thrash this one person, it will have a psychological effect on others.

I kicked him hard in the middle of his legs. He buckled.

I started hitting him brutally on his nose, ribs and lower back. The other four kicked me like a dog, but my focus was only on that one man. When he was on the ground, I found a stone and started swaying it around me.

Legs, hands, faces... whatever came near, I struck.

Eventually, they ran.

I picked myself from the ground, panting. My arms were on fire. I brushed dirt from my shirt and jeans and lingered around, frantically catching my breath.

The whole thing had lasted for hardly a few minutes.

From Azad Maidan, I was to head to a Gandhi Book Store in Girgaon, to interact with a group of Sarvodaya Gandhian activists. To be safe, I told Pratik to meet me there (mercifully, the phone still had battery). After the interaction, I told him what had happened.

"Shouldn't you file a complaint about this?" he asked.

"No. They will immediately offer me police protection. I don't want it. I will be as good as under house arrest, and under their total surveillance."

Later that day, all the Loyas blocked me on social media. Nupur, of course, had already blocked me on WhatsApp and Facebook on 21 November. But Anuj, Anuradha and Harkishanji did the same, and when I called them, their phones were switched off. Panicked, I sent a few friends to their house in Pune, but the security guard refused to let them in, and divulged no information.

Since November 24, 2017, I haven't spoken to any of them.

I have heard reliable rumours of what happened behind the curtains, but I'll keep mum about them for two reasons. Firstly; no reputed journalist reports on mere rumours. Secondly; even in a tell-all, some things must remain unsaid.

*

The next day was Pratik Nandgaonkar's birthday. He wore a white shirt, smart, black trousers and a wide smile—all set to accompany me to see Sharad Pawarji.

Pratik drove me to Pawar's office at the YBC building at Nariman Point. I kept dozing off in the car. After getting thrashed at Azad Maidan, and after the Loyas had blocked me, I had had a very restless night.

Anyway, the NCP chief's office was on the fifth floor of the

YBC building, opposite Supriya Sule's. When we arrived, Pawar's Private Secretary Satish Raut sent a visitor's slip inside. Soon after, we were asked to enter.

As expected, it was a luxurious place. There was a huge table on the other side of the office. Sharad Pawarji was sitting on a sofa chair. A beautiful wooden book cabinet adorned the big wall behind him.

Pawar smiled like the sun, and eagerly gestured to a two-seater sofa by his right. Pratik and I took our seats.

"Your story has become a talking-point across India," he said. "Congratulations!"

I thanked him politely, feeling rather reserved.

"I heard you had to resign from THE WEEK to publish this story. So… how are you going to manage now?"

"Yes, I had to. It's been hardly a month since I resigned. Right now, I'm okay. I hope to survive."

"Okay, okay," Pawar saheb said. "We can also think of how we can work together in the future."

I guessed what that meant. Vinod Jose had already warned me not to divulge anything. I hadn't planned to, anyway. I did not want to give information that anybody could use as political leverage. That was absolutely not the point of the investigation. Therefore, like my wife, I chose the path of silence.

"Okay," he continued, smiling. "So, what do you expect from us?"

The Loyas blocking me on social media was still on my mind.

"Saheb, it would greatly help Judge Loya's family if you issue a statement of solidarity. You are a very respected figure in Maharashtra. If you hold a press conference or even tweet in their

support, they will feel very relieved."

"Okay," he said. "We will discuss this within our party and decide. But, is the story over? Or is there going to be more to what was published?"

"The story isn't over. It's going to be a long series and a lot more to expose. I can't reveal that until it is published."

Pawar didn't press further. Instead, I introduced Pratik to him. Pawarji very kindly asked Pratik about his family, education and business. He spoke like a fatherly figure. Pawar even took a photo with Pratik, as a kind of birthday gift. My brotherly neighbour, flushed with happiness, took the NCP chief's blessings before we left.

Datta Balsaraf, a close confidante of Supriya Sule, was already waiting for us at the door.

"Why don't you meet Supriya tai too?" was the first thing he said. "She has been very keen to meet you."

Without waiting for an answer, he led us inside.

Supriya Sule's office was almost as large as her father's. A fancy table was on the right side. A pristine wooden cabinet with books was erected behind her chair. Even though a few Mumbai journalists were crowding the office, the place was pretty spacious.

One of the journalists recognized me and started chit-chatting. Pratik looked uneasy. I was fighting the sudden urge to leave. I knew some of the journalists in the room, and had reason to not consider them credible. So why was I here? And what kind of company was I keeping?

Supriya Sule, Member of Lok Sabha and daughter of Sharad Pawar, caught my eye.

"Niranjan Takle, what a brave story you have done," she

said. "I want to talk to you. Everyone else can leave."

The other journalists dutifully exited.

"How long did you work on the story?" she asked. "Do you have all the evidence? Don't you feel scared?"

"No, I'm not scared. I chose to do this. They would want to scare me, but I won't let them succeed by getting scared. The story took almost eighteen months. And yes, I have all the evidence."

She asked very sweetly for my sources. I declined.

"I had shivers when I read the articles," she said. "I'm going to Pune soon for some work. But after that, please tell me what I can do."

"Judge Loya's immediate family stays in Pune," I replied. "His wife and children are very scared. Tai, since your constituency is in Pune, it would be a huge morale booster if you met them. Stand with Sharmila as a woman; as someone who has lost her husband. It will mean a lot."

"Certainly! I will surely meet them. Take down my number. Please send me their address. And call me anytime if you need help."

We had tea and chatted. Datta Balsaraf entered. He asked me to visit YBC for regular interactions. That wasn't likely, I thought. It increasingly felt like the NCP did not call to check up on me—more like they wanted to build connections for future contingencies.

When we left, Pratik was buzzing. He considered the photograph with Pawarji as his best birthday present ever. I was happy for him, but my mind was still stuck on Loya's family.

Needless to say, till this day, nobody from the NCP issued a statement of solidarity, and nobody visited Brijgopal's bereaved family.

*

On the morning of 27 November, Hartosh sir added seasoning to my stress-laden plate.

"Niranjan, please read today's story by The Indian Express. We need to rebut it immediately! I will call you again in an hour."

I woke up hurriedly, ignoring the jabs on my knees and back, and logged onto their website. I groaned, but it was not out of pain.

'CBI Judge BH Loya's Death in 2014: Nothing Suspicious, say two Bombay HC Judges who were at Hospital', an article's title read.

On a personal level, this had come at the worst time. I was not in Mumbai. A day after meeting Pawarji and Supriya tai, Pratik had drove me back to Nashik... back home, back to my crying wife.

The sight of her pale, swollen eyes had startled me.

She wasn't talking, wasn't cooking, and didn't even want me going out on the scooter. So worried was I over the Loyas, that I became a little blindsided to matters closer to home.

I told her what Kumar Ketkar sir said, and reminded her of the few influential people who were supporting us. Nothing helped.

Maybe it was not right to work on Judge Loya while she seemed in such a depressive state. But I also had an obligation to follow-through on my duties. I sighed, suppressed a quiet pang of guilt and began reading the article.

And the sighs instantly turned to rage.

The Indian Express article opened with a quote. No report (especially a report as important as this one) began with a quote.

Most Journalism 101 courses said that articles began by a sentence that answered basic who-what-when-where details. This article, however, directly started with Justice Bhushan Gavai talking about Judge Loya and Ravi Bhavan.

I scrolled down and saw the ECG report, which was IE's main contention. The ECG report had a wrong date, and Judge Loya's name was handwritten in the margins.

'Brijmohan Lohiya', it was spelt.

The report also quoted an anonymous government forensic expert, who said that the blood on Judge Loya's shirt and jeans was "bound to spill out during post-mortem as we open all major cavities in the body."

What a ridiculous rewrite of history!

Clothes and accessories were always removed and kept in a sealed bag before a post-mortem. The family was told that a similar procedure was followed in Judge Loya's case. And now, readers and citizens were supposed to believe that a simple accident was behind the blood-soaked shirt? That blood just happened to spill on the clothes of a CBI Special Court Judge?

Thankfully, Twitter was ablaze with similar questions. When I told Hartosh sir this, he laughed.

"We don't need to rebut it immediately then. We will add all the points in a future story. But I will call you once again when I meet Vinod. We need to discuss subsequent stories in this series."

I spent the day writing a complete rebut on Facebook, and talking to several people who also condemned the so-called 'Journalism of Courage' by The Indian Express.

But unfortunately, none of it mattered.

It didn't matter that the article was full of holes. It didn't matter that the ECG looked fabricated. It didn't even matter when

cardiac experts concluded that the same ECG showed no signs of a heart attack.

Because, the next day, young Anuj Loya sent a letter to Bombay High Court's Chief Justice, Manjula Chellur… following five days of radio silence from his family.

"We have full faith in the members of the judiciary who were with him on the night of November 30," the letter said, referencing The Indian Express article.

That, and the ECG report, were the two feeble threads on which Judge Loya's death span into an ugly game of narratives—not a game of facts.

And that, in hindsight, was the beginning of the end.

*

After two days of voluntary house arrest, the setting sun looked prettier than ever.

My wife and I were finally outside. After constant reassurance, she had finally agreed to a walk in a jogging park. It was a lovely little path surrounded with trees and few people. Low-volume instrumental music played on speakers that were installed alongside the track. Nashik's breeze was always very welcoming, very homely.

She and I sauntered for a lap of 800 meters, letting the wind and melody waft over us. The walk was good for my bodily pains, and even better for my wife's morale.

When we started the second lap, Mahesh Zagade came walking toward us.

Mahesh sir was the Divisional Commissioner of Nashik. We had built a great rapport of mutual respect over the years. But something in my stomach turned when I saw him.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" he said loudly. "Why are

you walking outside so casually?!"

I tried to smile.

"Sir, I'm just taking a walk with my wife."

"Okay," he said. "She too should understand. You have crossed the roads of people who are very vindictive and dangerous. You have to be very careful and alert. You can't walk around casually! Don't even maintain a fixed routine."

I felt like sinking in a deep sea. I blabbered something I don't even remember, said goodbye to Mahesh sir and walked past. The Divisional Commissioner meant well, but his wisdom couldn't have come at a worse time.

I glanced at my wife, who was staring at me the whole time.

"We are not going to walk one more step. Let's immediately go to the scooter and go home."

On the way back, she rested on my back and wept.

All my efforts were wasted. The cycle of fear had rebooted. Over the next few days, I kept motivating her as much as possible, but this was hard to do when Vinod sir and Hartosh sir kept calling. They had deployed a team of journalists to investigate newer angles of the Judge Loya and Mohit Shah stories. I kept calls as brief as possible, because my wife was my priority. I kept trying to lift her spirits, but what was my word against Mahesh sir's?

One day, after a lot of conversation, I said something rash.

"Look, if I confine myself to the four walls of the house, people will think that Niranjan got scared. Do you want this to happen? If I am destined to get killed, I will get killed even inside our house. I'm sure you don't want that to happen."

She simply stared, said nothing and went into the

bedroom. Inside, she started crying. I felt horrible. I heard her phone ring, and soon discerned that our daughter was on call. But when I approached the bedroom, she shut the door before I could enter.

I distracted my mind by watching a movie on television, but didn't have to wait that long for the door to reopen.

"I spoke with our daughter," she said. "Now I understand. You should go out and continue what you want to do. I truly believe so. You must speak about the story at every place you are called."

Afterward, she nicely ate daliya for dinner and even cracked jokes. I was surprised. Whatever my daughter said, it was like a switch was flicked!

Soon after, my own phone rang. It was Paranjoy's friend; the same person I had met on 20 November.

"Can you meet me at the Churchgate office tomorrow? It's important."

*

"Wear a cap. Look down while walking the corridor to the lift. When you reach security, write your surname as 'Jain'."

Pratik and I laughed.

"Why does this man want to see me if he's so scared?" Instead of indulging him, I registered my real name, and Pratik and I entered the Churchgate office.

Paranjoy's friend welcomed me but asked Pratik to wait outside. He ordered tea.

"Paranjoy wants to meet you in Delhi tomorrow. He has asked you to reach India Habitat Centre by 11 a.m. Apparently, he wants you to meet Arvind Kejriwal—the leader of Aam Aadmi Party and Chief Minister of Delhi."

"Kejriwal?" I said instinctively. "I don't want to meet him."

"See," Paranjoy's friend said, "right now, mainstream media is not covering or following up on your story. But if Arvind Kejriwal takes this up, entire media will cover it."

"I know he will not do anything. I strongly believe Kejriwal is an RSS stooge and an anarchist himself. I don't want a person like him to have this as leverage."

I wasn't faffing. Back in 2011, during Anna Hazare's famous 'India Against Corruption' movement, I had done a sting operation on the so-called second Mahatma Gandhi. I posed as a sardar from Delhi, looking to donate money to the movement. In conversation, Hazare revealed to me that, at 5 a.m. every day, senior RSS leaders came to decide the IAC's agenda of the day.

The news had shocked me to the core.

Because of that, I also interviewed Arvind Kejriwal, on camera, in the basement of Kiran Bedi's bungalow. I wanted to know what the Jan Lokpal and IAC movement was all about. I also wanted to get a measure of Mr. Kejriwal himself.

"Who is your 'Lokpal'?" I had asked him. "In our three-tier Constitution of India, where does he/she fit? Legislature, Executive, or Judiciary?"

"Since the person is appointed, not elected, they surely fall under Executive," Kejriwal replied.

"Okay. You are demanding that the Chief Justice of India and the Prime Minister also fall under the Lokpal's jurisdiction. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Look, right now, the Constitution says Legislature is supreme. This is because they are directly elected by the people.

The Prime Minister, as head of Legislature, is the most supreme: If you want the PM to be accountable to an executive official, then there will have to be a Constitutional amendment."

"Yes, there will," Kejriwal said. "But that's the problem of the Sarkar."

"True," I replied, "but even if PM Manmohan Singh wants to amend the Constitution to pass your Lokpal Bill, he cannot. He doesn't have three-fourth majority in both houses. And you need three-fourths majority to amend the Constitution of India."

"That's not our problem," he simply said.

"But if you know that such a radical Constitutional amendment cannot happen, why are you doing so much drama on the streets? What's your goal?"

He was silent.

Soon after, the truth came out in the wash (though not soon enough). Even though the IAC had said no politician would be allowed on their stage, BJP leaders like Arun Jaitley and Venkaiah Naidu were called. Sushma Swaraj even danced on their manch. Later, it also became common knowledge that 'Team Anna' was created at the Vivekananda International Foundation—a think-tank with deep ties to the BJP and RSS. Even today, its founder Ajit Doval serves as Modi's National Security Advisor.

That wasn't all. Prashant Bhushan, a core member of IAC and a founder-member of AAP, said in an interview that Anna's movement was "propped up by the BJP and the RSS."

"Arvind was aware of it; I have very little doubt of that," Bhushan said. "A regret that I have is not having understood Arvind's character earlier enough. I understood it too late, by which time we had actually created another Frankenstein's monster."

However, despite my clear reservations, Paranjoy's friend was adamant.

"Look, now that Paranjoy has called you to Delhi, it will look very rude if you don't go. Remember, he helped you bring out the story."

He kept emphasizing that point until I felt duty-bound. Eventually, I said yes and left.

Pratik sensed that I was furious. Why wouldn't I be? The story was no longer standing as a separate entity, but was becoming a pawn of the Great Indian Political Chessboard. And pawns were killed quickly.

*

The next day, at 11 a.m., I was at India Habitat Centre.

The last time I was here, Mr. Anant Nath, Director of Delhi Press, had promised me a job at The Caravan. How ironic, as the events that followed probably undid that conversation.

Inside, Paranjoy Guha Thakurta was waiting for me in their garden restaurant, wearing his typical kurta and thinly-rimmed square spectacles. Our conversation was going to completely bowl me out.

"Hello Niranjan, My friend you met yesterday in Mumbai wants you to meet Kejriwal. This way, we can amplify noise about your story."

"Your friend wants me to meet Kejriwal?" I asked. "But your man in Churchgate told me that you wanted this to happen, and that it'd look rude if I don't travel to Delhi."

He shook his head vigorously.

"Let me order something for us. Does Vinod Jose know you're in Delhi? He's also in the city. Let me call him."

Before I knew what was happening, he dialled a number.

"Niranjan is in Delhi," Paranjoy said. "We are sitting in India Habitat. He wants to meet Kejriwal."

Ten seconds later, Paranjoy passed the phone to me. I was shocked and incensed. When did I ever intimate that I wanted to meet that anarchist?

Vinod was also furious, as he should be.

"Hey Niranjan. Why do you want to associate with politicians like this? We don't like this. We don't approve of journalists associating themselves with political leaders."

He hung up. I was shocked and shaken.

"Paranjoy," I told him, "I never wanted to meet Kejriwal. I believe he's an anarchist and a stooge of the ruling dispensation. And now you told Vinod sir that I want to meet him? I'm hoping to get employed with The Caravan. This can ruin everything!"

"Don't worry," Paranjoy said. "I'll speak to him."

I didn't want to argue further because Paranjoy was senior, but the manner in which I was obligated to travel to Delhi and meet Kejriwal (of all people) felt very conniving. Paranjoy fixed a meeting with the AAP leader at 7 p.m., at his official residence. Till that time, I had nothing to do in Delhi, and also wanted to vent. Thankfully, someone trustworthy was staying in the nation's capital.

I found Swagata Yadavar at a restaurant in Connaught Place.

"Hats off to you, sir. I knew that only you could do this story," she said. "But what will you be doing now? Any job?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I think the possibility of employment at The Caravan got ruined an hour ago."

I told her all that transpired with Paranjoy about Kejriwal.

"How are you?" I asked. "It's been a while since you left

THE WEEK and joined IndiaSpend. How do you find it?"

"It's much better," she said. "I handle the health beat; same as with THE WEEK. I had had a very bad experience with THE WEEK, which is why I quit. But all the stories we do at IndiaSpend are based on data analysis. There is also more freedom, and a better working atmosphere."

It seemed like Swagata had landed well. I was delighted. She was young, but she showed signs of a true journalist—one of the few. I hoped that the future would be kinder to her than it was for me.

*

The Chief Minister of Delhi's official residence is a bungalow in Civil Lines. When I reached there, alone, at 7 p.m., there were two guards standing outside a tall, iron gate. Two more in the inner booth. Two sandbags, behind which armoured guards stood.

These sights instantly put me on my guard. I recalled how, in 2013, Kejriwal had claimed that he and AAP's MLAs would refuse red-beacon cars, bungalows or security cover. A man who didn't live up to their word was not a man to readily trust.

They were waiting in the hall, which was also littered with security. Paranjoy Guha Thakurta sat on a sofa opposite the entrance door. Ashish Khetan, his friend, sat to the door's right. When Ashish saw me, he immediately stood up from the side-sofa.

Even though he was bearded, Ashish had calm eyes that instantly put one at ease. This way why, at first glance, it was hard to apprehend that Khetan was a pioneering figure in investigative journalism. He had done some stunning sting operations on Hindu fundamentalist leaders like Babu Bajrangi and Maya Kodnani. At the time, however, he was working with the Aam Aadmi Party.

Ashish was sitting beside Arvind Kejriwal, who looked

much smaller without his shawl. While sitting, Kejriwal moved his hand forward for a handshake. It didn't seem like he recognized me from the IAC interview in 2011.

"Arvind," Paranjoy said, "this is Niranjan. He investigated and broke the Judge Loya story."

They were, I noted, on a first-name basis.

Ashish chipped in. "Yes, and he has done quite a few great stories in the past. I have kept a close eye on his work."

"I read your stories and saw the videos too," Kejriwal said. "Has any judicial investigation been appointed?"

"No," I replied. "So far there has been no such announcement. Mainstream media is also not following up, despite press conferences held by Shabnam Hashmi, Apoorvanand and Hartosh Bal."

"Don't worry," Kejriwal sir said. He looked at Ashish. "I will sit on an indefinite hunger strike, demanding to appoint an investigation. Automatically entire media will cover it!"

Paranjoy was visibly impressed.

"That's a great idea. In fact, you should announce your hunger strike a couple of days in advance."

"I can announce even tomorrow that I will be sitting on a hunger strike from Monday onwards."

"But why should you go on a hunger strike?" Ashish asked. "You can simply demand for an investigation. You are the Chief Minister of Delhi. How will it look like if a CM goes on hunger strike?"

"That's precisely why I will do it," Kejriwal said smugly, turning to me. "What do you think?"

I had remained silent this whole time, trying my utmost to not roll my eyes in front of the Chief Minister. However, if I sensed

a politician pulling the wool over someone's eyes, it was my duty to call their bluff.

"That would be great. In that case, I will stay back in Delhi till Monday and join your hunger strike."

"No, no," Kejriwal immediately said. "We will have to discuss this within our party. You can go back to Mumbai and continue your work."

I shrugged. "Don't worry, I am jobless now and have nothing else to do. Taking this issue to its logical end is the only objective for me."

Kejriwal looked at Paranjoy like a deer caught in headlights.

"No, no. Let him go back. Let me discuss this in the party and we can let you know."

"Okay then. I have a flight to catch tonight. I should go."

"Wait," Kejriwal said. He offered tea. They began talking about AAP's efforts to form an alliance with the Indian National Congress, and how Rahul Gandhi was not responding. I stayed silent. This topic was not my concern, and not related to Judge Loya.

"Do meet me whenever you are in Delhi," Kejriwal said when I eventually stood up to leave.

Paranjoy and I left together.

"Mark my words," I told him outside the iron gate, "Kejriwal sir will not do anything: neither a hunger strike, nor a demand for investigation."

The fact that I called him sir instead of a cur was down to my habitual folly of assuming merit in seniority; not because he was worthy of the designation.

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14. The Evidence, Explained

AFTER my two articles on 20th and 21st November 2017, several members of The Caravan continued the Judge Loya investigation. Hartosh Singh Bal delivered on his promise by following up most of the questions he presented in that tiny Delhi apartment. This chapter will summarize their findings (with my assistance), between November 2017 to April 2018.

The evidence is granular with a lot of moving parts, but they are all necessary to prove that Judge Loya was murdered.

On whose order? The answer, to me, is stupidly obvious.

*

Ravi Bhavan: Where It All Began

Nothing is contested as far as the Duronto Express train and the wedding at Nagpur is concerned. The discrepancies begin on 30 November 2014, around 11:40 p.m.—which was when Judge Loya ended his call with Sharmila Loya. Let's get into the

nitty-gritties.

There's written proof about how a Judge named Vinay Joshi wrote a letter to the Law and Judiciary Department (dated 27 November 2014) to book a suite in Ravi Bhavan under Judge Loya's name. The Law and Judiciary Department subsequently wrote to the PWD and Protocol Officer to carry out the same.

Now, Judge S.M. Modak's statement is that Judge Loya slept in the same room as Judge Shrikant Kulkarni and Modak. According to Ravi Bhavan's occupancy register, Modak and Kulkarni were staying in Suite 10, which is on the first floor of Building Number 1. This building also houses Ravi Bhavan's main reception. Therefore, it's logical to assume Judge Loya was staying in Suite 10.

However, he wasn't.

Judge Loya's name was not in the occupancy register at all. In fact, the occupancy registers have multiple row gaps and overwritten dates around November/December 2014 (i.e., around Loya's death) and November/December 2017 (i.e., around my breaking of the story). The errors are related to Loya, Kulkarni and lawyer Milind Pakhale, and pretty much prove tampering of evidence.

There was no extra mattress ordered to Modak and Kulkarni's suite (each suite only has two beds), no sign of Loya's luggage and personal effects in Suite 10, and an employee even remarked that since Ravi Bhavan's "guests are so senior and high-up, they prefer not to stay in the same room."

In addition, since hierarchy among judges is so stringent, it is impossible to believe that Loya, a senior judge, would sleep in the same room as Judges Modak and Kulkarni, let alone on a mattress.

By the way, Justice Bhushan Gavai, in The Indian Express

article, said that "Loya was staying with fellow judges Shridhar Kulkarni..." Milord, Kulkarni's name is Shrikant, not Shridhar.

The only thing supporting Modak's story is that only one of 17 employees recalled seeing Loya "in one of the rooms" on 30 November, and it's not even clear which room this is.

But, for the sake of exhaustive analysis, let's keep humouring Modak and Kulkarni. The pair said that, "around 4 a.m.", Loya complained of chest pain in Suite 10. Kulkarni called Judge Vijaykumar Barde (a local Nagpur judge), told him about Loya's heartburn, and asked him to come to Building Number 1 with Judge Roopesh Rathi.

According to Rathi, Barde picked him up from his quarters with his car, and the two then went to Building Number 1, where "Judge Loya was answering natures call". Soon after, the five judges (Loya included) left Ravi Bhavan and headed to Dande Hospital.

The contradictions and questions are already multiplying. When the family were told of Loya's death, they were also told that he was carried to Dande Hospital by rickshaw; ergo, one of the events is false. Furthermore, none of the staff members on duty that night (including the chief engineer of the PWD Department!) recall anyone being taken to hospital. There was no sound nor commotion in an area where, otherwise, "even if there was a spark because of faulty wires, we would come to know."

Another point to consider: two sources at G.M.C. and one at a police station told me that they were informed of Judge Loya's death by midnight, and that they had personally seen the body. If this appears to throw a wrench into the rest of the chapter, do not worry: this bit clears up by the Epilogue.

It's true that there are no designated drivers in Ravi Bhavan. But that does not explain why there was no call to a

reception desk made. If there was, an ambulance or some form of medical help would have been "managed in 10-15 minutes" (according to a staff member), and no car/rickshaw would have to be arranged.

Remember: this is a VVIP guest house, not the boys' hostel of a B-graded college.

Most damningly, no staff member even had an idea of Judge Loya's heartburn, heart attack or death/murder, until I broke the story three years later.

"Even when high-profile people staying at the guest house got drunk and got girls into Ravi Bhawan late at night, we would hear through the grapevine what had happened ... how can it be that we would not know if a judge had been rushed to the hospital at four in the morning and then died?" an employee commented.

Therefore, the story of the judges stank from the start.

Dande Hospital: The ECG Test

A brief note before getting into the Electrocardiogram (ECG): why did the four judges not take Judge Loya to Lata Mangeshkar Hospital, Wockhardt Hospital or Wockhardt Heart Hospital—all of which are much better hospitals than Dande, and also around the same distance? Is it because the Director of Dande Hospital, Dr. Pinak Dande, is an RSS man?

Anyway, from Ravi Bhavan, the five judges went to Dande Hospital, an orthopedic hospital. Here, the broad story is that an ECG test was done for Loya. If you are unaware, an ECG's job is to figure out whether the heart's rhythm/electrical activity is hunky-dory, or whether surgery is needed.

All of Modak, Kulkarni, Barde and Rathi testified regarding this ECG. In case you need reminding: Kulkarni and Modak were the judges who boarded the Duronto to Nagpur with Judge Loya. Barde was a local Nagpur Judge, and Roopesh Rathi

was the Deputy Registrar of Nagpur's High Court Bench.

Because Kulkarni, Modak, Barde and Rathi physically travelled with Loya from Ravi Bhavan to Dande Hospital, the Supreme Court's eventual judgement relied heavily on their testimonies. Their story is that, after Loya felt heartburn at the Bhavan, they took him to Dande to check if all was well.

Point of contention: Rathi says this ECG test never happened. Anuradha Biyani also corroborates Rathi's words, saying that their family was told no test was performed at Dande, because "the ECG was not working".

Rathi's statement is also clear and detailed: "At that time the doctor tried to do his ECG but the nodes of ECG machine were broken. Doctor tried and wasted some time but machine was not working. I..." Incredibly, at this point, Rathi's statement to the Supreme Court is evidently cut off.

However, Kulkarni, Modak and Barde imply that this ECG did happen... just in much vaguer words. Modak says an "initial check-up" happened at Dande, while Kulkarni ambiguously talks about "emergency treatment". Barde comes closest to mentioning an ECG, saying that Loya was "checked up [...] by ECG, Blood Pressure, etc.", but he never elaborates on his position to the length that Rathi does.

If an ECG is done, this ECG chart must exist. And The Indian Express reproduced this very chart on their website on 27 November, 2017... except (a) 'Dande Hospital' and 'Brijmohan Lohiya' are only handwritten in the margins, (b) the ECG's timestamp reads 30 November when it should read 1 December, and (c) it was never even submitted to the Supreme Court as evidence. When Dr. Pinak Dande was asked about the wrong date, he said something about a "technical glitch," even though no other ECG charts that were generated on 30 November and 1 December

have this glitch.

This, Rathi's words, Pinak's pithy excuse and The Indian Express' dicey article increases suspicion that the ECG chart was fabricated afterwards. And these are not the only anomalies. Dr. Ninad Gawande, the consultant who literally made the medico-legal case at Meditrina Hospital (more on that below), told The Caravan that Dande Hospital sent him no ECG chart.

"The ECG was not there," he said. "The main scene at the time was, there was no ECG." Precisely because Dr. Gawande had zero proof of a heart attack, he wrote in the MLC that the cause of Loya's death was "undetermined".

This is a poorly cooked angle by the establishment, especially since both Dr. KK Aggarwal (Padma Shri recipient) and Dr. Mohsin Wali (physician to three Indian Presidents) also say that there are no strong indicators of a heart attack on the basis of The Indian Express' ECG chart.

Anyway, Dr. Pinak Dande said that they "realized he [Loya] needed specialized cardiac treatment which is not available with us". Therefore, the five judges went to Meditrina Hospital instead.

Meditrina Hospital: Dead on Arrival?

Judge Loya reached Meditrina at "5:30 or 5:40", as per Dr. Ninad Gawande.

The "three or four" people accompanying Judge Loya (presumably Modak, Kulkarni, Barde and Rathi) were telling Meditrina doctors that Loya had chest pain and was vomiting. The doctors noted that Loya was in shock. Therefore, as soon as Loya was admitted, doctors administered CPR.

It is claimed that Meditrina also took an ECG test of their own (if they did, this should confirm that no ECG was taken at Dande). Meditrina's ECG test showed agonal rhythm, not a flat

line, which would mean Loya was still alive at the time. This is corroborated by Dr. Ninad Gawande, who clarifies the terminology of 'death on arrival' that they used in Meditrina's records: "[Loya's ECG] was not showing a flat line. That is why we have not labelled him 'brought dead', we have labelled him 'death on arrival'—we tried our best."

However, Meditrina's ECG chart has not been reproduced anywhere. If it even is, it would contradict the post-mortem report's claim that Judge Loya died on the way to Meditrina.

Dr. Gawande, if you remember, was the consultant who made the medico-legal case. He was not at Meditrina when Loya was brought there. He got a call from Dr. Pankaj Harkut, a colleague at Meditrina, telling him about a patient on the verge of death. "This patient has been admitted," Dr. Harkut told him. "He really is in the final stages. What should we do in such cases?"

Gawande told Dr. Harkut to call the police. This was because they had zero medical history of the patient, and the absence of ECG was also suspicious. Soon after, Dr. Gawande went to Meditrina himself, and realized that it was a sea of chaos.

Firstly, no doctor knew the patient's name. This is absurd, since Modak, Kulkarni, Barde and Rathi were at Meditrina. In addition, various documents/accounts confirm that Justices Bhushan Gavai and Sunil Shukre were also there, along with "other members of the Maharashtra judiciary". Were they all infected by a sudden plague of amnesia?

Secondly, no judge gave the doctors information about Judge Loya's kith/kin, medical history (or even name). Therefore, in general, there was a lot of ambiguity over how this man was on the verge of death. All they knew was that the patient was from Mumbai and a Ravi Bhavan resident. Dr. Gawande, therefore, decided to call the police as per Section 174 of the Code of

Criminal Procedure. Loya's companions "were somewhat reluctant, but I told them that it is per the procedure and the police will decide whether to conduct post-mortem or not," Dr. Gawande said. "When the patient came here he just had terminal rhythm, which could be any damn thing. So just to rule out [any doubt] the post-mortem is essential."

The irony that, among a bevy of India's esteemed judges, only one medico-legal consultant had the sense to follow protocol, is not lost to me. Hats off, Dr. Gawande.

Oddly, Dr. Gawande received an ECG chart from Dande Hospital on 2 December i.e. one day after Loya died, which is another huge abnormality. This chart was just "brought over", according to him, and now conveniently showed changes suggestive of myocardial infarction (or heart attack). This, then, cannot be the same chart that The Indian Express reproduced in their article, because experts like Dr. KK Aggarwal and Dr. Mohsin Wali dismissed that they show signs of a heart attack.

Anyway, despite the doctors giving the patient inotropic support, DC shock and resuscitative measures, Judge Loya either died on the way to Meditrina Hospital, or at Meditrina itself. Of course, there are unanswered questions regarding this as well. Even though records declare Loya's time of death as 6:15 a.m., how did Judge Barde call Sarita Mandhane "around 5-5:30 a.m." regarding news of Loya's death?

Anyway, a death summary was prepared at Meditrina. The summary recommended a medico-legal case and post-mortem to ascertain Judge Loya's cause of death. Dr. Gawande dutifully prepared this MLC and called the cause of Loya's death "undetermined".

At this point, there were "more than 20 judges" at Meditrina Hospital, if the Joint Commissioner of Nagpur police is

to be believed. Bear this in mind, for the disdain toward the Indian Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code is about to skyrocket.

P.S. Judge Loya's 'Final Inpatient Bill Summary' shows Rs. 1,500 fees for neurosurgery. The neurosurgery was done by Dr. Harkut, who is a cardiologist, not a neurosurgeon. Besides, why on earth do you need neurosurgery for a heart attack, that too on a patient who 'died on arrival'?

Unless there was a bleeding head requiring hasty stitches?

Zero-FIRs and Police Jurisdictions

After Dr. Gawande's call to the police, a Zero-FIR was filed at Sitabardi police station, which has jurisdiction over Meditrina Hospital. This is confirmed by the station-house officer at the time, Mr. Hemant Kharabe. Sitabardi station, therefore, registered an Accidental Death Report regarding Loya's death, but they registered it on "30/11/2014". This error with the date is the same error that The Indian Express' ECG chart made. Even if there were no ulterior motives, this is symptomatic of a shocking nonchalance toward the murder of a CBI Special Court judge.

Anyway, the Sitabardi police recorded no statements of the 20-something judges accompanying Loya. A Sitabardi police constable named Pankaj (badge no. 6238) simply took Judge Loya's body from Meditrina Hospital to G.M.C. Hospital for post-mortem.

It's important to note here that, at four in the afternoon, the Zero-FIR was transferred to Sadar police station (more on that later). For context, Sadar station has jurisdiction over Ravi Bhavan. This is perfectly legal, mind you, but it raises another question: did something particular happen at Ravi Bhavan which dictated this transfer?

P.S. 'Sitabardi' is accidentally spelled as 'Sitabuldi' in some of The Caravan's articles. These are not separate police divisions.

G.M.C. Hospital: Medical Reports

Let's say a corpse is taken to a post-mortem room, and it is a criminal matter. What's the mandated procedure, according to the Indian Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code?

Before anything, the doctors must compulsorily wait for an Executive Magistrate's presence. The process can only begin in this officer's presence.

The doctors first empty the dead body's pockets. Perhaps they remove a cellphone, a handkerchief, wristwatch, ring or spectacles. They keep all of this in a polythene bag. They then undress the body and keep the clothes in the same bag (this bag will be given to the body's kith/kin later.) All of these possessions are also faithfully recorded in a list for the family's reference.

This entire process of Inquest panchanama and the post-mortem must be video recorded and photographed as legally mandated in Maharashtra.

After this, a document called the Inquest Panchanama is created. Bear in mind that Inquest panchanama is a specific type of panchanama. When any person dies, due to the result of crime or under suspicious circumstances, then the Executive Magistrate has to draw Inquest panchanama as per Section 174. This separates the Inquest from Spot panchanama, Memorandum panchanama, etc.

Anyway, layman observations are recorded in the Inquest. Were the clothes bloody? Are there visible bruises on the body: a missing finger, a bloody leg, etc.?

After this is done, the doctors require permission from the kith/kin to do what comes next. If and only if they get permission, they can begin the post-mortem.

Post-mortem involves cutting the body. If there are signs of foul play, the doctor doing the cutting dictates what they see to

an assistant. The assistant faithfully records this. Later, the doctor who did the post-mortem will use the observations to draft a report called the Forensic Recommendation Report (let's abbreviate it to FRR). This FRR asks questions like, what exactly is suspicious? What must be analyzed further? Which viscera (internal) organs must be used as samples?

Meanwhile, the doctor finishes the cutting and prepares the post-mortem report. The post-mortem report and FRR are signed by the same doctor.

After this, the relevant viscera samples and copies of FRR are sent to two places: the pathology lab and the forensic lab.

The doctors at the pathology lab read the FRR, check the body, do chemical analyses of viscera tissue organs and finally prepare a histopathology report. If, for example, a person is poisoned, the report answers questions like: which poison was used? What was the quantity? When was it administered? Was it given directly, or smuggled via food? These viscera tissue organs are also stored for years in the same hospital, so that no one can legally dispute how a person died.

The guys at the forensic lab do pretty much the same thing, before they prepare a Forensic Report. It is also called the Viscera Report. This report will present factual observations regarding the entire body (of course, observations will vary depending on the body).

To sum up, the medical records of concern are: a. Inquest Panchanama b. Post-mortem Report c. Forensic Recommendation Report d. Histopathology Report and e. Forensic Report / Viscera Report.

According to the Supreme Court, Judge Loya's body was received by G.M.C. Hospital at 10 a.m. on 1 December, 2014 i.e., around 3 hours and 45 minutes after his official time of death. Let's

track its journey.

a. Inquest Panchanama

Several members of Loya's family said they never received the Inquest panchanama. However, an Inquest panchanama is cited in the Supreme Court's eventual judgement in April 2018. This Inquest states that the dead body "does not find any mark of injury or assault". This is vehemently contradicted by Harkishanji (who saw blood on the clothes), Sarita Mandhane (who saw blood on the neck), Dr. Anuradha (who saw head trauma and a twisted jaw) and Dr. NK Tumram, who literally signed the post-mortem report.

b. Post-Mortem Report

On 11 February 2018, The Caravan published a lengthy interview with Dr. RK Sharma, former Head of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology Department at AIIMS Delhi. Dr Sharma is also a CBI consultant and speaker at international seminars like the FBI's. His views will be presented intermittently throughout the medical reports.

According to official records, Judge Loya's post-mortem began at 10:55 a.m. and ended at 11:50 a.m. But there's zero video/photo evidence of this, even though it's mandatory in Maharashtra according to the Criminal Procedure Code.

Various people inside the G.M.C. confirm that Judge Loya's post-mortem was directed by Dr. Makarand Vyawahare. Vyawahare is the brother-in-law of Maharashtra's finance minister under Devendra Fadnavis' government. He was also linked to sexual harassment complaints, a student's suicide attempt, widespread protests in G.M.C., falsified reports and around 17 allegations of botched post-mortems.

On 1 December 2014, Vyawahare arrived at the forensic-medicine department at 10 a.m. sharp, kept inquiring about the

day's post-mortem schedule, took tense cigarette breaks and visited the post-mortem room thrice—all of which was highly unusual for his character. When Loya's post-mortem began, Vyawahare donned surgical gloves and did it himself. He even yelled at Dr. NK Tumram, who questioned him about the wound on the back of Loya's head, telling him to "write only as much as I am telling you". Conveniently, Vyawahare's name does not figure in any report (or on any paperwork). Instead, the post-mortem report and FRR is signed by Dr. NK Tumram.

Let's look at the report itself, which is full of mistakes and proofs of foul play.

On the first page of the post-mortem, it says that Judge Loya's death happened on 30 November. Ten days later, this was overwritten with the correct date. Judge Loya was also initially named as 'Brijmohan' instead of 'Brijgopal'. These errors are not necessarily proof of foul play, but give you further demonstrations on how horribly protocol was followed... despite 20-odd judges being there at the time of Loya's death.

Incredibly, this first page was also excluded from the documents sent to the Supreme Court, until various petitioners pointed out this glaring error.

The report states that calcification is observed in Loya's vessels. "Where there is calcification," Dr. RK Sharma of AIIMS said, "there is no heart attack." In addition, Dr. Sharma said, "If one is alive for more than 30 minutes after the symptoms [of a heart attack] show, the condition of the heart will have clear changes. No clear changes can be seen here."

The report also says that rigor mortis was "slightly present in upper limbs [and] not appeared in lower limbs" (parts of the dead body stiffen 10-12 hours after death. This is termed as 'rigor mortis'). This indicates that Loya died much before 6:15 a.m.

Sarita Mandhane attests to this, since she got a call about Loya's death at 5 a.m. from Judge Barde.

But the smoking gun is in the papers I uncovered at Nagpur, with risk to my life. It says that the dura mater (outermost layer surrounding the brain) is congested. "[This] indicates some kind of an assault on the brain. A physical assault," Dr. Sharma said.

Other congested organs are the liver, pancreas, spleen, kidneys, oesophagus and lungs. The reason for congestion is conveniently avoided, but poison can do these things.

Despite the congestion, and despite the he-said-they-said eyewitness testimonies, a sentence in the post-mortem report says: "No evidence of any bodily injuries".

The condition of the clothes are described as 'Dry', even though several people say this is not so (including me, who saw Judge Loya's bloody clothes at Harkishanji's house).

The report concludes by saying that the probable cause of death is "coronary artery insufficiency". However, according to Dr. Sharma, "there is a possibility of poisoning. Every single organ is congested. Isme investigation hona chahiye."

The post-mortem report was signed by Judge Loya's maiyatacha chulatbhau i.e., paternal cousin of the deceased. Harkishanji said, "I do not have any brother or paternal cousin brother in Nagpur." In addition, when this chulatbhau himself was identified—a man named Dr. Prashant Rathi—he said that he "did not even know Loya saab."

c. Forensic Recommendation Report

The post-mortem and forensic recommendation report are signed by the same Dr. Tumram. However, Dr. Tumram's signature is on two other post-mortems between the 10:55 a.m. – 11:50 a.m. slot. Does Dr. Tumram have as many hands as an

octopus, which made him capable of doing three post-mortems at once?

He doesn't.

Anyway, Judge Loya's post-mortem ended at 11:50 a.m. After FRR and post-mortem, the viscera organs should ideally be sent to the forensic lab and histopathology lab right away. But records show that it took all evening for this to happen. How so?

Something must have happened at either Ravi Bhavan, Dande, Meditrina or G.M.C. that prompted Sitabardi police station to register a zero-FIR regarding Loya's death. This 'something' most likely happened at Meditrina, since Sitabardi has jurisdiction over Meditrina, and we know that Meditrina's Dr. Ninad Gawande phoned the police.

However, at 4 p.m., Sitabardi station transferred the Zero-FIR case to Sadar police station, who have jurisdiction over Ravi Bhavan. Therefore, after 4 p.m., the Sadar station took care of Loya's viscera samples. Until 4 p.m., the histopathology report had to wait.

But why the four-hour delay? Why transfer to a station with Ravi Bhavan's jurisdiction? Who even transported the viscera samples? Your guess is as good as mine.

d. Histopathology Report

The histopathology report was prepared at G.M.C. Hospital on 1 December, 2014.

The report mentions that three containers filled with diluted formalin were received. Diluted formalin is used to preserve viscera samples from decay or drying up. These samples included tissue pieces of the coronary vessel, aorta, myocardium (the heart's muscle layer), liver, spleen, kidney, brain, lung and pancreas.

A microscopy (or, observation and analysis via microscope) was conducted on all these samples.

The report states that the aorta showed normal histology, and "sections from multiple myocardial tissue pieces show normal histology". In short, everything concerning Judge Loya's heart was normal.

Predictably, after Dr. RK Sharma read it, he categorically said that "the findings in this report have no suggestion of a heart attack."

However, the report says that sections from the cerebrum "show oedema and congestion". Oedema is a build-up of fluid in the brain (in this instance), which is a natural response to injury. It's how swelling or inflammation occurs.

Sections from the spleen also showed congestion, the report says.

The second smoking gun: the report clearly states that "sections from Kidney show features of Acute Tubular Necrosis". ATN is often caused by a lack of blood flow and oxygen to the kidney tissues. It may occur if the kidney cells are damaged by a poison or harmful substance.

To conclude, the histopathology report corroborates that there indeed was assault on the brain. Furthermore, the report shows zero symptoms of cardiac arrest, but a possibility of poisoning.

e. Forensic Report / Viscera Report

The forensic report, for some unknown reason, did not happen at G.M.C. Hospital. Instead, after the zero-FIR incident, the relevant documents and tissue samples were sent to Regional Forensic Science Laboratory (Nagpur).

The report itself is a mockery to the name of medical

science. A field is titled 'rigor mortis' i.e., an indication of how stiff body parts are. It shamelessly says that rigor mortis is "well marked". Except that their report is based on tissue samples, while the body was on the way to Gategaon.

Official records also state that the viscera analysis began on 5 January, 2015, and ended fourteen days later. This is very suspicious. Viscera analysis usually happens right after post-mortem, and takes 1-2 days to complete. This happened 35 days after Judge Loya's body was cremated.

Suffice it to say, Dr. RK Sharma and Dr. Upendra Kaul (former prof. Cardiology, AIIMS Delhi), after analyzing all five reports, dismissed the claim that Loya died of a heart attack.

And so do I.

Transferring the Body

Judge Loya's body was sent to Latur instead of Bombay, where he and his family (Sharmila, Anuj, Apurva) were staying. The body reached around 11:30 p.m., which raises another point of concern. Today, there are four-laned roads that can get you from Nagpur to Gategaon in 11-12 hours. However, in 2014, when the roads were much worse, the ambulance would have taken 16 hours, if it was lucky. If the post-mortem concluded at 12 p.m., how did the ambulance reach Gategaon by midnight?

Anyway, the ambulance driver was the only person accompanying Loya's body to Gategaon. Perhaps the amnesia plague hit the poor judges again.

As you know, Anuradha Biyani noted bloodstains on the neck. Harkishanji noted blood on his shirt, from left shoulder to waist. Dr. Biyani's inquiries for a second post-mortem were discouraged by Judge Loya's own frightened friends and colleagues.

Three or four days after Loya's death, an RSS worker

named Ishwar Baheti (as told by Dr. Anuradha Biyani) handed the family his two phones (with data erased). This broke all protocol. Indeed, the Joint Commissioner of Nagpur Police himself confirmed that Loya's mobile never came into the police's possession after his death.

The Loya family did know of one SMS, though. It was sent from an unknown person, more than a week preceding his death.

"Sir, stay safe from these people."

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15. The Judgement

Arun Shourie stared, pained, at his captive audience. Pratik Nandgaonkar and I were among them.

We were at the Mahalaxmi Racecourse in Mumbai, attending the book launch of Anita Gets Bail. The author, Arun Shourie sir, was in the middle of a stirring speech. Shourie sir was an aged, learned, wise soul, and an old friend of mine. He was also, once upon a time, an economist, editor at Indian Express, recipient of the Padma Bhushan, and Union Minister to Atal Bihari Vajpayee's governments.

"...saving a country, or saving institutions, requires the cooperation of everybody. Mr. K.P.S. Gill used to say, that 'you can't have a first-rate Anti-Terrorism Operation, and a third-rate magistracy'..."

I listened with rapt attention.

After the event, I purchased a copy of Shourie sir's book. When I went to him for an autograph, Shourie sir shook my hand,

hugged and invited me to his hotel to catch up. There, he asked everything about the Judge Loya investigation. He also asked about my job situation, family and future plans. I told him that I wanted to pursue investigative journalism.

Shourie sir looked at me with fatherly eyes. He always looked with fatherly eyes.

"My suggestion to you is not to engage yourself in anything right now," he said. "Just sit at home and write a book. A comprehensive description about how the investigation happened—how several evidences were revealed. Your book is a must."

Shourie sir, I realized, had signed my copy of Anita Gets Bail as 'To Niranjan, who deserves a Param Vir Chakra.'

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Between January to April 2018, I travelled around India like a bard, spreading the word about Justice Loya.

On the advice of Advocate Mihir Desai and Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, I went to Delhi, Kolkata, Lucknow, Bhopal, Ujjain, Pune, Satara, Solapur, Aurangabad, Nagpur and Ahmedabad. Dattaprasad Dabholkar, Kavita Krishnan and universities in America had also invited me for talks. Every speech was directed toward telling the truth about Judge Loya, the judiciary and the state of investigative journalism in India. Each speech was aimed to smoke out a petition, an inquiry commission, a hearing, anything.

Elsewhere, the Courts of India were in a frenzy.

Things were moving quickly. A former Chief Justice of Bombay High Court wrote a letter to the sitting Chief Justice, requesting a judicial investigation into Loya's death. Former Supreme Court's Justice A.P. Shah publicly concurred to this notion. Two Public Interest Litigations were filed in the Bombay High Court—one by an activist, another by the entire Bombay

Lawyers Association. These PILs were seeking an independent probe into Judge Loya's death.

It's necessary to clarify what the PILs entail. It was conveying that the petitioners thought the manner of Loya's death was suspicious, and they wanted a proper trial about the issue. The trial would begin only if the PILs were accepted by the courts.

Of course, if the petitions were rejected by Bombay's High Court, the petitioners were free to head to the Supreme Court. This is why it made sense (and was common practice) to file PILs of such magnitude in lower courts first, and push the matter to the apex court if it was rejected.

What didn't make sense was filing PILs straight to the Supreme Court. Which is also what happened.

There were two petitioners to the Supreme Court. When I saw their names, I was shocked before I was suspicious.

One of the petitioners was Tehseen Poonawalla. Tehseen was an activist, venture capitalist, TEDx speaker and social media personality. He even showed up on Bigg Boss in 2019. More pertinently, he claimed to be a Congress leader from Pune. On paper, Tehseen fitted the profile of a person who would file a petition for such a matter. But file it straight to the Supreme Court? Surely, if Tehseen was a Congress man, he was in the game long enough to know that it was more tactical to approach a lower court first?

Tehseen's lawyer was Dushyant Dave—an enthusiastic, veteran advocate who offered to fight his PIL pro bono.

The second Supreme Court petitioner was an ex-journalist named Bandhuraj Lone. His petition was much more suspicious than Tehseen's. I knew Bandhuraj on a first-name basis, since he had worked with Loksatta and TV9 Marathi in the past. I had heard through the journalist grapevine that he was unemployed and facing serious financial problems.

So how did he hire a very senior, very expensive advocate like Pallav Shishodia... an advocate who also represented Amit Shah during the Sohrabuddin trial?

My suspicions were compounded on 11 January, 2018. This was when Tehseen's lawyer Dushyant Dave went to the Chief Justice of India, Mr. Dipak Misra, to file Tehseen's PIL. Dave was told, instead, to list his petition to a junior judge named Justice Arun Mishra.

Dave openly expressed his shock at this, saying that Dipak Misra was "completely overlooking the seriousness of the matter, which demanded that it be assigned to the senior most Judges, preferably a Five Judge Bench of Senior Judges headed by Chief Justice himself."

On the same day, Lone's lawyer Pallav Shishodia went to Chief Justice Misra with his PIL. Incredibly, Justice Misra swiftly approved this petition, agreed to hear the matter himself, and said that proceedings would start from the very next day.

The speed of this was completely at odds with how legal proceedings operated in India.

While the Bombay Lawyers Association and the activist went to the High Court, Tehseen and Bandhuraj went straight to the Supreme Court. They knew, full well, that if the apex court rejected the PIL, there would be no other judicial avenue to investigate this issue.

And they did it anyway.

I couldn't prove nor allege anything, since I was no longer an investigative journalist, but it was starting to feel like Tehseen and Bandhuraj did not have entirely transparent motives behind their PILs. And (if I may be honest to the point of being vulnerable) the idea of political pawns being placed in such an early phase of judicial inquiry was unnerving, unsettling and utterly unprecedented.

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The next day, 12 January, 2018, will go down in the history books of the Indian judiciary.

In Mumbai, the High Court heard the two PILs by the activist and the Bombay Lawyers Association. They scheduled the next hearing on 23rd January. Around the same time, the Supreme Court in New Delhi was hearing Tehseen and Bandhuraj's petitions. The apex court decided to club both petitions into one. I anticipated this. I also anticipated that, in the future, the PILs at Bombay High Court would be transferred to the Supreme Court.

But I couldn't, in a million life cycles, anticipate what would happen that day.

Not long after the hearings, a senior Supreme Court judge named Justice Chelameswar invited the press to his home. The media went there on incredibly short notice, to find that Justice Chelameswar was not alone. He was joined by three other senior Supreme Court judges—Madan Lokur, Kurian Joseph and Ranjan Gogoi.

Justice Chelameswar, with folded palms, did most of the talking.

"My dear friends," he said, on live television, "all of you know, this is an extraordinary event in the history of any nation—more particularly this nation. An extraordinary event in the history of this institution of judiciary. We were compelled to take this decision to call for a press conference."

So far, he was right. This was the first time in the Supreme Court's history that its senior judges had called for a presser of this kind. Of any kind.

"For some time, the administration of the Supreme Court is not in order," he said. "There are many things—which are less than desirable—which have happened in the last few months. Time and again, as senior members of the Court, we thought we

owed a responsibility to the institution, to the nation. We tried to… collectively…"

"Persuade?" whispered Justice Gogoi.

"…persuade, the…"

"Chief Justice?"

"…the Chief Justice, that certain things are not in order. Therefore, you should take remedial measures. Unfortunately, our efforts failed. And, my dear friends, all four of us are convinced that unless this institution is preserved, and it maintains its equanimity, democracy will not survive in this country. Or any country."

This was a bombshell of a quote.

Justice Chelameswar took pains to clarify that they weren't commenting on what was happening in the news. That they weren't concerned with political controversy. But he didn't stop talking about Chief Justice Dipak Misra.

"This morning, on a particular issue, the four of us went and met the Hon'ble Chief Justice of India with a specific request. We could not, unfortunately, convince him that we were right. Therefore, we were left with no choice except to communicate it to the nation. We have heard a lot of wise men talking in this country. I don't want—another twenty years later—some very wise men in this country blame us, that, 'Chelameswar, Ranjan Gogoi, Madan Lokur and Kurian Joseph sold their souls. They didn't take care of this institution! They didn't take care of the interest of this nation!' So, we place it before the people of this country. That's all, gentlemen," he ended, folding his palms again.

A racket ensued. Reporters bombarded the Supreme Court judges with questions. Justice Chelameswar looked reluctant to answer. Justice Gogoi whispered in his ear. Chelameswar continued, in the most diplomatic, vaguest way possible.

"About a couple of months back, the four of us gave a

signed letter to the Chief Justice of India. We'll give copies of the letter. We wanted a particular thing to be done in a particular manner. The thing was done... but in such a way that it left too many questions. It raised further questions and further doubts about the integrity of the institution. This morning also, we had to go on something like this—"

Interruptions. Hubbub. Questions. Gogoi whispering again. Chelameswar speaking, but constantly being interrupted.

Eventually, Justice Gogoi took the lead.

"There is no speculation here," he said firmly. "We are going to give you a copy of a letter, which we had written two months back. All the issues are spelt out there. Go through that letter. You'll know what the issues are. Do we have to repeat those issues again?"

"Is there any specific issue...?" a reporter asked.

"It is an issue of the assignment of a case, which is an issue raised in that letter," Gogoi answered briefly.

"Is this about Loya's thing?" a reporter asked.

"Is it about Loya?" another chimed in.

Without a second's hesitation, Justice Ranjan Gogoi answered.

"Yes."

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The game of facts was now a game of narratives.

Justice Chelameswar's press conference was a stirring show of support from the judicial fraternity. True to their word, the judges made their letter public. It accused Chief Justice Dipak Misra of hand-picking particular judges "selectively to the benches 'of their preference', without any rationale basis for such assignment. This," the letter said, "must be guarded against at all costs."

The press conference and letter finally compelled the (hitherto silent) Indian mainstream media to report on Judge Loya. Brijgopal's face was now the face of the news cycle.

More drama unfolded the next day, when Tehseen Poonawalla and Dushyant Dave had a public spat. Tehseen claimed that his lawyer was bullying him into withdrawing his own petition. "Dushyant Dave told me that Arun Mishra is Dipak Misra's henchman," Tehseen said.

Dave replied by saying "it is my deep regret that I offered to appear for Mr. Poonawalla pro bono, since I felt it was a genuine case." Dave had recommended Tehseen that he withdraw his petition from Justice Arun Mishra's bench because, in Dave's words, "Justice Arun Mishra has close relations with top BJP leaders, which I had seen myself in his own house, on wedding reception of his nephew in December 2016."

Tehseen, however, declined to do this, leading Dave to decide that he "will not appear for him because it was a set up", and "a self-serving petition perhaps at the instance of Amit Shah." Dave ended up representing the Bombay Lawyers Association, while Tehseen found himself a new lawyer named Varinder Kumar Sharma.

Amidst all this, the narrative was hitting a tipping point. Aside from The Caravan, prominent members of the judiciary were beginning to seriously interrogate the issue and demand an investigation.

And the narrative tipped further when, two days after the judges' press conference, young Anuj Loya held a press conference of his own. It was at Mittal Towers.

While it was Anuj's press conference, his lawyers did most of the talking. They said that many people were harassing the Loyas, particularly Anuj. They said that the family had no suspicions regarding Brijgopal's death. They even had the audacity to claim that the Judge's body received good treatment.

When Anuj was asked to answer a question (with some difficulty), the boy was brief.

"They had some suspicions because of emotional turmoil at that period," the boy said, referring to my interviews with Dr. Biyani and Harkishanji. "So right now, even they are clear with it. And... even they don't have any issues."

"Do you want an investigation, or you don't want?" a reporter asked.

"I am no one to decide it! I don't have any suspicions."

It was clearly a tactic to create sympathy for the boy, his family, to provoke the public to not talk about Judge Loya's murder, and to push the narrative away from the true culprits. But the tactic backfired the moment Anuj's body language was broadcasted on live television.

Because the fear on the boy's face was equally clear.

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"Several events in the years since Independence have been indelibly imprinted on my mind from the time that I witnessed at close quarters, the horrors of Partition as a young lad growing up in Delhi in the 1940s. To mention a few—the ruthless slaying and pogrom let lose against the Sikhs in 1984; the inexplicable destruction of places of worship including the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the deliberate killing of large numbers of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002.

"I continue to watch with mounting dismay, the current and continuous violations of basic human rights, attacks on minorities—especially Muslims and Dalits, and the systematic weakening and debilitation of all our established institutions, including the judiciary. As we celebrate the 68th anniversary of our Republic– each of these events listed above, represents a serious violation of the Constitution, for which I hold the Governments of the day accountable."

This was, I think, a rather touching extract from Retd. Admiral L. Ramdas' letter to Chief Justice Dipak Misra. Admiral Ramdas, along with the Youth Bar Association of India, had just filed Interventions to courtly proceedings. Admiral Ramdas had also chosen Indira Jaising (former Additional Solicitor General) as his lawyer.

On paper, any citizen of India can file an Intervention for any case. However, in such high-profile cases, many don't. The monetary and emotional costs to committing oneself through this process is too much for too many (understandably), and that is not even to mention the political vendetta that it may bring.

Admiral Ramdas and the Youth Bar of Association's Interventions were, in this regard, very heartening. And it also brought two very senior lawyers like Indira Jaising and Prashant Bhushan (the Youth Bar's lawyer) in the courtroom.

By this point, the Bombay High Court PILs had been transferred to the Supreme Court. This was probably part of the establishment's plan. But the press conference by the four judges and the two Interventions had forced Chief Justice Dipak Misra's hand. He could no longer sweep the PILs under the opaque rug of Indian judicial protocol. There were too many people watching.

Therefore, the Chief Justice allowed the Interventions, transferred everything to the Supreme Court, and even created a three-judge bench to hear the issue.

The judges included Justice Chandrachud, Justice Khanwilkar and Dipak Misra himself.

By the end of January, hearings were in full swing. The state government had appointed Mukul Rohtagi (former Attorney General) and Harish Salve (former Solicitor General) as their Special Prosecutors. Dushyant Dave and Indira Jaising teamed up to push through the PILs of Admiral Ramdas and the Bombay Lawyers Association.

Hearings happened almost every Monday, Tuesday and Friday. I saw most of them in person, and can tell you they were incredibly noisy and chaotic. On paper, Pallav Shishodia was in the same team as Dushyant Dave, Indira Jaising, Varinder Kumar Sharma and Prashant Bhushan, but it was obvious that Shishodia had motives of his own. Very early during the trial, Shishodia even requested the three judges to dismiss the petition.

At another point, Shishodia literally turned towards Dushyant and said: "Dave, we don't care what you say... you can go to hell or heaven or wherever you want."

Dushyant Dave was having none of it. He gave as well as he took. When the bench threatened to hold him in contempt of court, he said, "okay, hold me!"

At one point, Dave even told the bench that "it is disappointing that the State is opposing the probe. What is even more disappointing is that all those who are appearing for the State today appeared for Mr. Amit Shah. But your Lordships don't want to hear that."

I had the distinct impression that the lawyers, on all sides, were acting like bickering slum maids, tearing each other's hairs out to access the common tap of water.

During these hearings, a lot of facts recorded in the previous chapter came out in the wash. This included the Ravi Bhavan register, the fabricated ECG (which wasn't ever produced before the Supreme Court), Judge Rathi's cut-off and contradictory statement, calls to Loya's family from 5 a.m. onward, the bill that included neurosurgery, the botched post-mortem, the congestion of organs due to poisoning, and the body being sent to Gategaon instead of Mumbai.

But a lot of new facts were also uncovered.

For instance, it was revealed that Judge Loya's bodyguard was removed a week before his death. Every CBI Special Court

Judge was entitled to a bodyguard, so what was the explanation behind this? The state government didn't offer any. The state government also didn't provide CCTV footages of Ravi Bhavan, which would have cleared an ocean of confusion regarding what really happened.

Another new fact was uncovered about Judge Loya's post-mortem. By law, an Executive Magistrate must be present during any Inquest Panchanama. Instead, the police wrote a letter on 2 Feb 2016 (more than a year after Judge Loya's death) to an Executive Magistrate, informing him about a post-mortem that happened back in 2014. The letter, predictably, didn't mention any head trauma or blood.

Judge Loya's post-mortem was also not video recorded, even though this was mandatory in Maharashtra.

Remember Dr. Prashant Rathi—the maiyatacha chulatbhau, the paternal cousin? The official explanation for this was so convoluted, it would almost be funny if the subject matter wasn't so tragic.

Apparently, a judge in Nagpur told someone named Hansaraj Baheti in Latur, that Judge Loya died and he was about to have a post-mortem (Why? Good question). Hansaraj told this to his relative, Ishwar Baheti, who was also Judge Loya's friend (apparently). Ishwar Baheti called Rukmesh Jakhotia (someone in Aurangabad) and told him this. Rukmesh called his nephew and told him to receive the body and sign the post-mortem. That nephew is Dr. Prashant Rathi.

So how was Dr. Rathi Judge Loya's paternal cousin?

But perhaps the most shocking revelation was that an 'unofficial inquiry' was conducted by the state government on 23 November 2017 i.e., three days after my first story broke. The terminology was changed to 'discrete inquiry' after considerable uproar.

This uproar was justified—discrete inquiries aren't in the Constitution or any Penal Codes.

Anyway, this 'discrete inquiry' was under CID Chief Sanjay Barve. It lasted for forty-eight hours (i.e., around the time the Loyas blocked me). The result of this discrete inquiry was a bunch of letters from Judge Loya's family and other judges, which said they had no suspicions about Brijgopal's death. It even said that I, the journalist, 'took' the answers I wanted from them, and that they didn't know I was recording, both of which can be proven false.

To top it all, Sanjay Barve didn't even bother to depose the letters via an affidavit, and the Supreme Court didn't bother to ask for one, even though the letters were a huge part of their eventual judgement.

If you are puzzled, you should be. There's no legal provision nor precedent for most of this.

There were still the Real and Demonstrative evidences. Dr. RK Sharma, after analyzing all five medical reports, had dismissed the claim that Loya died of a heart attack. Even Dr. Upendra Kaul (former prof. Cardiology, AIIMS Delhi) largely supported Dr. RK Sharma's views. Now, there were two very credible voices falsifying Loya's medical reports. So, what did the Court do?

Firstly, it disregarded Dr. Upendra's testimony on the basis of "leading" questions. Secondly, it bigged up the opinion of Dr. Harish Pathak instead (H.O.D. of Forensic Medicine at KEM Hospital, Mumbai), who had concluded that Judge Loya's death was due to coronary artery insufficiency.

"We are not really considering here whether the opinion of Dr Pathak should be preferred to what was opined by Dr Kaul," the Court said, in a laughable attempt at sounding objective. "The point of the matter is that facts have emerged from the record which indicate that a carefully orchestrated attempt has been made

[...] to cast a doubt on the circumstances leading to the death of Judge Loya."

But shouldn't a he-said-she-said dispute between doctors regarding the murder of a CBI Special Court Judge, be the very reason an inquiry is conducted?

Also, special points for the 'carefully orchestrated attempt' turn of phrase. The honourable court might as well have said 'vested interests' or 'Congress lobby'.

In addition, nearly one month after Dr RK Sharma's views were published by The Caravan, AIIMS Delhi sent a letter distancing themselves from the story. "No doctor from the Department of Forensic Medicine has given any opinion about the death of Judge Loya," they said, conveniently forgetting that RK Sharma was a former doctor.

Dr RK Sharma himself redacted his words, claiming he was "grossly misquoted by Caravan magazine regarding death of Judge Loya". In response, The Caravan released WhatsApp screenshots between Sharma and reporter Atul Dev, which confirmed that Dr Sharma was backtracking.

Or was being made to backtrack.

In summary, the apex court weaseled its way out of any serious investigation. When Dushyant Dave submitted a list of 11 names (including mine) and requested permission to cross-examine them, the Court buried their heads in the sand. When the advocates claimed there was pressure on them to drop the PILs, the Court remained mum.

Amidst this farce, it's worth remembering that Justice Chandrachud categorically called the issue "a very serious matter," and that Chief Justice Dipak Misra asserted that no one was questioning the bonafides of the petitioners.

It's also worth remembering that Justice Chandrachud is next in line to be the Chief Justice of India.

*

Ujwal Khelkar, Guest Coordinator for ABP Maza, called me on 19 April, 2018—the day the Supreme Court released their final judgement.

"Hello, Niranjan?"

"Yes, Ujwal. Tell me."

"Today, at 7:30 p.m., our news channel is having a panel discussion on Judge Loya. We want you to be on the panel."

Since I was driving, and my cousin brothers were in the car, I was slightly distracted.

"No, sorry. It won't be possible for me to be there," I said, cordially but briefly, before hanging up. We were just driving away from the Ganga ghats, where we had completed the ten-day ritual ceremony for my elder sister. I wanted silence and, for once, time to think about things not related to Judge Loya.

But the calls wouldn't stop. Ujwal tried me a couple of times more before I answered.

"Niranjan," Ujwal was saying, "the Supreme Court order has come. We want you to come on the show."

"I can't come," I said, getting irate. "My elder sister passed away. Today is the tenth day, and it's full of rituals and procedures. Many relatives have come to our home."

Ujwal stopped calling, but the anchor Prasannan Joshi called me next.

"Niranjan, I think you should come. It's such a big story and you were so involved in it. If you don't come, you're sending the wrong message."

I told Prasannan the same thing I told Ujwal, but the anchor's words were stuck in my mind. After the call, I read the entire Supreme Court order that was uploaded on their website. My articles had featured three times in the Court's order.

If you don't come, you're sending the wrong message.

Eventually, I spoke to my wife, told her that I was needed at the studio, and was in ABP Maza's studio by 7:30 p.m. The anchor, Prasannan Joshi, was summarizing the news for the audience. The Supreme Court had, in the morning, rejected the PILs and Interventions. The Court called the petitions politically motivated and in criminal contempt. It also called the petitions an 'assault on judiciary', and asserted that statements by lower court judges could not be questioned, because it showed the judiciary in a bad light.

I could think of many other things that held the judiciary in bad light.

The panel had Mukul Rohtagi's junior lawyer, a BJP MLA and myself. Very quickly, it became obvious that I was called there to be gloated on. The two guests, with so much enthusiasm, kept harping on about the Supreme Court's dismissal, and about how they were right and I was wrong.

Eventually, I started hitting them too.

"Look," I told them, "The Supreme Court's order has my story printed thrice. Nowhere is it said that the story was concocted, fabricated, or based on false information. Their reasons for dismissing the petitions were their own. They said the petitions were criminal contempt, and that it amounts to assault on the judiciary. Why did they entertain it, then? Who told the Supreme Court to admit the petitions? Justice Chandrachud called it a serious issue, and Justice Dipak Misra said that no one was questioning the bonafides of the petitioners. They took hearings for three months... and then called it criminal contempt? Then why isn't the Court arresting people for 'criminal contempt'? If it really is an assault on the highest body of justice, then why are you letting them go scot-free?"

I had silenced the guests, but I didn't stop. My next focus was on the anchor.

"Prasannan, ABP Maza didn't do a single story about Judge Loya. No follow-up, nothing. Nobody wanted to talk to me from November till now. And now, suddenly, after the Court's dismissal, you want to do a live telecast? My sister died and I still showed up to this panel. And for what? So that ABP Maza can portray that they're neutral?"

To his credit, Prasannan Joshi started appreciating me. He said that this was the true commitment of a true journalist; that it was praiseworthy to show up after such personal loss. But I would be lying if I said I was listening.

To be honest, on that day, I was on autopilot—echoing the same questions that I was asking for ages, and not getting a suitable response. I silenced the panelists without much effort, without much thought. They were not even fair, not even right.

But that didn't matter.

Because they had won.

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Epilogue

On 20 November 2020, I began my birthday at NCP Chief Sharad Pawar's bungalow.

This time, the face of the NCP's chief was not smiling. Instead, it was sombre and wrinkled, with aged eyes that concerted itself in sufficient effort to appear wise and concerned. He wished me a happy birthday, and asked how things were with the missus, in tones that could be mistaken as the start of a memorial speech.

"So. What do you want to do about Loya?" he asked, the moment the usual pleasantries were exchanged.

I sighed, and immediately fortified my mental guard.

"What can I do, saheb? What I had to do, I did."

"Yes, but everyone has moved on. The conspirators are still free. There needs to be an investigation. How do we do that?"

"I am ready for any investigation, but you already

know the way to go. Appoint a Judicial Commission under The Commissions of Inquiry Act. It comes under state law, so you don't need to run it past BJP or Amit Shah. Even a one-line order from the state's Home Minister will suffice, and I'm sure Anil Deshmukh will please you."

"But what happens after? So many police agencies in Nagpur must have manipulated things behind the curtains in 2014 and 2018 to bury this story. Sanjay Barve even became Mumbai's Police Commissioner over it. They won't investigate themselves."

"Doesn't matter. A Judicial Commission headed by a retired High Court Justice can be formed and the members of the commission can be selected. The members should be those who know where to look, what to demand, what questions to ask, and where to find the evidence."

But Pawar saheb shook his head.

"Inquiry Commissions provide recommendations to court, not obligations. Besides, the Sohrabuddin trial already went to the CBI Special Court. Amit Shah was acquitted. PILs for Loya were also denied. One commission will change nothing."

"It changes everything. Although a court had acquitted Savarkar from Gandhiji's assassination case, Justice Kapur's Commission had indicted him for the murder conspiracy in the light of new evidence. People know about it now, and citizens never forget. Amit Shah is discharged in the Sohrabuddin murder case. We cannot call it an acquittal because a trial never happened for him. The commission can indict whoever are the perpetrators. All it requires is the political will."

Pawar saheb only said, "Give me a note on how it can be done," before he dropped the subject. Perhaps 'political will' was a step too far.

I left from Mumbai and drove to Nashik. Traffic zoomed.

Crows cawed. Garbage burnt. Dhaba owners eyed at cars in hopes one would pull up. Countryside winds swirled with old thoughts, old memories.

Political wills. Political compulsions.

Sharad Pawarji was not the only one. I had telephonic and personal interactions with political leaders like former Chief Minister Ashok Chavan. When he asked me what should be done, I requested him to meet Judge Loya's family personally, to give all the support in the world to them.

"They need to be protected. They are the crucial evidence," I said. But nothing happened.

I also met Radhakrishna Wikhe-Patil in the Maharashtra state assembly building. Wikhe-Patil was, at the time, the leader of opposition in the state. I gave him twelve points to describe and raise questions regarding Judge Loya's death. The man hurriedly read out a few of the points I made, spoke for fifty seconds, and left the house the moment he was over.

At least Rahul Gandhi, on the other hand, walked with 115 MPs of thirteen political parties, from the Parliament to Rashtrapati Bhavan. At least he appealed to the President of India to appoint an investigation regarding Loya's death. I always wondered that if such a story had pointed fingers at Rahul Gandhi or any Congress leader, wouldn't BJP burn their effigies across the country? In every single chowk?

Political wills. Political compulsions.

It was exactly three years since the Judge Loya story hit the Internet. So much had changed since, yet so much stayed the same. Unemployment, for one. I was in my third year of this unwanted tenancy. Anant Nath had flaked on his promise of a job at The Caravan by offering a derisory freelance gig instead. I rejected it. Penguin Random House mailed soon after, saying they wanted to

publish the Loya investigation in book form. They backed out three months later.

I freelanced here and there, and gave talks at places who knew what real journalism was, but being a political hot potato in India meant that even The Wire or The Hindu were hesitant to hire me.

It could have been worse.

The murky memory of Advocate Surendra Borkar came back to mind—a memory otherwise worth repressing. This time, however, the ride from Nashik to Mumbai was too lonesome, and the talk with Pawar had scratched several forgotten surfaces.

My first acquaintance with Advocate Borkar was on Twitter, shortly after the 2018 PIL verdict. He claimed, on Twitter, to have video evidence of Judge Loya's murder. He wrote:

"A hole was drilled in the back of Loya's head and he was killed. I have video evidence also. I kept it in six safe places. After Dipak Misra is transferred, I'll file a petition in court."

Fool.

He spat nonsense, just like many others at the time. There was a one-in-a-billion chance of such a video's existence, and the idea that a hole was drilled in Loya's head was as ridiculous as it was insulting to his memory. So, I called out Borkar's lie on Direct Messages, and told him to check if his own head had any holes.

Borkar apologised for exaggerating, but he didn't recant.

He said that Judge Loya was taken to a bungalow outside Ravi Bhavan at midnight. He was struck on the head with a drilling machine, he said. A local gunda caused the head trauma, he said. Someone shoved poison down Loya's throat ten minutes later, he said. The video was taken by an accomplice of the gunda for his safety, he said. There were a few of his judicial colleagues present

in the same bungalow... he said.

"The world will get shocked when the video will be out," he said.

Either Advocate Surendra Borkar was spinning a very wild tale, or the truth was wilder beyond my imagination.

But on second thoughts, it raised an interesting hypothesis: that the events at Dande, Meditrina and the G.M.C. more or less happened as understood... except 4-5 hours before official records. That would explain various time discrepancies—for instance, how the Loyas received calls around 5 a.m., how NK Tumram managed three post-mortems at once, or how the ambulance managed to reach Gategaon by midnight.

Very troubling questions also arose. Which bungalow was Judge Loya taken to? Who all were present there? Who was the henchman? And who hired him?

To be fair, Borkar never impressed me. Even if he had such a video—even if such a video existed—why blabber about it on social media? Why, being an advocate, exaggerate about the drilling machine and open himself to lawsuits? Even the way he typed the tweets was shoddy, and I'm half-certain he was slurring his words on phone.

Regardless, after months of on-off correspondences, I agreed to meet him on 30 July, 2018. Pratik (still my shadow) and I were bound to Mumbai the previous day, since I had a PUCL event with Advocate Mihir Desai and Indira Jaising.

I remember telling Advocate Desai about Borkar, and his first thought being, "Niranjan, make sure this isn't a trap."

The next noon, Pratik and I headed to the Press Club, since the CBI Special Court where Borkar worked was five minutes away. This was a convenient meeting spot.

Time passed. And passed. Then passed some more.

I sent him an SMS. I sent him missed calls. I lost my patience.

"Pratik, let's leave," I decided by 3 p.m. "He's not going to show up. Besides, I need to prepare for my tours to America and Canada."

We departed and, considering that Advocate Borkar had done nothing to establish his credibility, we forgot about him by the evening. Fourteen days later, however, he called again. This time, a woman spoke in Marathi.

"I am Surendra's wife. You and my mister spoke, didn't you?"

I hesitated. "When?"

"30th July?"

"No," I said dismissively. "We didn't speak." What I said was technically true, and I was also reticent to give the woman the impression that I ever spoke to Borkar.

"Oh. Well, I am sorry to inform you that he died that day."

"What?!"

"Yes… a few people came just now to give me his body, his things, and some post-mortem report. His phone also came with him. I called you, because I saw your missed calls and texts on the day… he…"

She started crying. I consoled her, now much lesser suspicious of insidious intents. The aftermath of the Loya story had, I noted, replaced my humanity with a hollow, unhealthy dose of scepticism.

"How…? How did it happen?"

"They said it was a heart attack. The post-mortem report also says that he died of a heart attack at 12:02 p.m. in the CBI Court. It says the post-mortem happened at 12:10 p.m. at J.J. Hospital, after which…"

"Impossible. Eight minutes?! The CBI court is on the sixth floor of the building. It takes ten minutes to even find a lift down. And J.J. Hospital is another good ten minutes by car!"

"Oh… I didn't know. I'm not from Mumbai."

"Where are you from?"

"Goa."

"Oh, okay. I once covered mining stories there."

"Oh."

A disturbing silence lingered like black smoke. A rattling sort of nausea gripped the inside of my ribs—the sudden realization that, while Pratik and I stood like bored statues at the Press Club, one block away, Surendra Borkar breathed his last.

Either that, or someone stopped him from breathing.

The woman broke the silence.

"You know… Surendra didn't have any heart condition. And, whenever he travelled to Mumbai, he had a fixed room in a particular hotel. He used to stay there for years. But on the 29th, the manager told him to find another hotel. I don't know. I found that, strange…"

She sobbed again. I consoled the woman further before hanging up. Even though I trusted her, there was nothing to substantiate her words. Heading to Goa for the post-mortem or to take a glance at the Advocate's body was suicide. If there was even a shred of truth to their stories, the woman would be under as much surveillance as Harkishanji.

Instead, I asked around in Mumbai.

She was telling the truth.

Another life lost, another life resigned to 'mysterious circumstances'... circumstances I could have investigated if I was still in the journalistic trade.

The country winds turned cooler. Nashik was here. Trees and wandering cows were gradually replaced with pye-dogs, flyovers and junctions with statues. The people, as usual, clogged up the narrow streets. The horn of my car blared with rage.

I muttered curses at the bitter wind.

I was angry. Angry at it all.

Angry that the furore in 2017 and 2018 did not convince the Supreme Court to reopen a slam-dunk investigation. Angry that people made lofty claims when they couldn't even stand with a bereaved family. Angry that journalists of today bubble-wrapped their news for an apathetic middle-class, who would anyway rather consume their slew of separatist facts from WhatsApp University. Angry that the one-percent made deals with a simpering regime which was otherwise authoritarian, otherwise absentee. Angry that the lower-classes were being trained, like castrated dogs, to tolerate the heat of demonetization, so that onion mafias and cattle cartels didn't feel like fire. Angry that the establishment could crank up the furnace till it was too hot to breathe.

On 20 November 2020, I ended my birthday with a vow: come hell or high heavens, this book needed writing, this story needed documentation. Even if it was self-published, even if I had to distribute copies on the street, even if tragedy was its necessary tone—even if there was naught to learn from it except how best to lick the stings of defeat.

This is my story. It ends on my note.

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Let me be clear: I have no idea how Who Killed Judge Loya will be received.

The paradisical possibility remains that Indians will strip away ideology and identity politics to, as a collective, throw the perpetrators in a jail cell. But conversely, we are equally capable of burning every copy of this book and, in time, completely surrendering to fascist trends.

Most likely, the misbegotten cowardly rats will hunker inside their sewage pipes and sneak out after the brief storm dies. But history is a consummate trickster: to predict her sure course is to predict which evaporated drop of water falls on which terrain of the world.

Regardless, I dread that this lotus is only beginning to bloom. BJP or no BJP, I believe India is on the cusp of a fifty-year nationalist cycle. The current regime has juked the system with misinformation, communalism, the Othering of dissenters and old-fashioned intimidation. Even if they aren't re-elected, their wheels are well in motion. I know universities where there are ten-year projects to saffronize the syllabus, and dissenting professors are sent for assignments when these crucial meetings occur. I have seen electoral campaigns essentially devolve to 'Do you want a neel candidate or a gulal candidate?', because there are now separate constituencies for Scheduled Castes. I have seen this strategy cause divisions among lower-caste citizens, and ghettoize assembly rooms.

The army, Election Commission, Reserve Bank of India, established media, Supreme Court... these institutions have never, ever, degraded to such deep roots. Power has highly concentrated, oppositions have scattered like chickenfeed and dissent is silenced in profoundly sinister ways. And forget BJP; at this point, why will any nationalist party stop now—when millions of bigots and contrarians are leaving their racist caves to

sniff open air, clout and the chance to settle old scores?

A colourless analyst would say that such parties are almost compelled to listen to their constituencies… however racist they may be.

To them, I say, political compulsions are a double-edged sword.

Think about the farmers' protest, the largest form of protest in the world. It is probable that Narendra Modi reneged on the farm laws because of compulsions like the 2022 Uttar Pradesh elections. Even though it was his selfish need to stay in power that facilitated this change, the truth remains that he was compelled to listen to the people.

Until the kisan andolan, no one had successfully defied the Union Government, that was as indifferent as it was Machiavellian. The students of Jamia and JNU, women at Shaheen Bagh, rallies of Kanhaiya Kumar were all tiny pockets of liberty and secularity. They took admirable stands against a borderline tyrannical regime, before being slaughtered.

Similarly, throughout the past year, as farmers' protests intensified, we saw the regime oppress, divide, appease, delay, and then destroy every form of opposition. A tired, predictable tactic, yet one that mostly wielded results.

But not this time.

Their attitude was something else. You want to spray water at us? Spray. You want to dig roads and build barricades, as if we're foreign soldiers marching to a foreign battlefield? Go ahead. You want to install plates of steel and iron nails? Be my guest. You want to cut off food supplies so that we die starving? We'll make our own langars. You want to black out media coverage and ignore our protests for a year? If need be, we'll stay here for ten.

We have nothing to lose.

It took far too long and caused far too many deaths, but the proud Sikhs stood up to the Union Government's bulldozing machine and eventually compelled it to reverse, thereby annexing their own justice.

I happen to share a WhatsApp group with some Punjabi and Haryanvi supporters of the cause, who contributed in wealth, manpower, food, etc. Several of them also protested at Delhi. Most of them, oddly, were from higher and middle classes: architects, industrialists, etc. who weren't economically affected by the laws at all.

To them, however, it didn't matter. A difference in class structure did nothing to eradicate their essential unity; their essential will to ward off the common evil.

There was something distinctly Nehruvian, distinctly Gandhian about this entire process—the consistency and nonviolence of the protestors, the unity across rich and poor, and the success in repealing corporate-friendly laws. Truly the protestors were comparable to a Marxian class: "a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering…"

Of course, cancelling the farm laws may yet be too soft a blow, as far as re-election for the BJP is concerned. But this protest went a long way to remove the 'fear factor' that, in my view, is unfairly assigned to them. The BJP and RSS appear to be scary, sure, but if you scare them back, they scatter. The kisans showed that these saffron freaks shout rather than shoot. They strike in the shadows, but if you show them that your backbone won't bend, they soon stop flexing their muscles.

It is societal pockets, and small victories like these, that give me hope for the distant future… if not the immediate.

Verily, I will die unhappy. The reason may be natural causes, the virus that is the new fashion of the town, an assassination attempt that actually succeeds, or a clumsy accident of which I am the unwitting culprit and victim. And, if my fifty-year hypothesis is true, I will not live to see any light to this dark tunnel. I shan't hear of an India without hate speech, without a discourse akin to a cockfight, without widespread institutional corruption and without treason dressed as daily politics.

But I do prophesy, at the end of this storm, a wiser country. I do prophesy the eventual eradication of saffron fascists. I do believe that the fake-news phenomenon foreshadows a future India where people stop thinking they're right all the time. I do envision Brahmins breaking bread with transgenders, and Christians and Muslims discussing Abraham and Ibrahim as if it were the Tuesday weather. I do foresee a mature acceptance, and subsequent tolerance, for the muddled waters of history. I do prophesy critics out of armchairs and citizens out of political chains.

Judge Loya's tale is told, and so is mine. Yet, let this journalist's dying voice breathe life into several more, and let the integrity of the country thereby multiply. Let democracy eventually tower over demagoguery. And let us, in time, claim this diverse country we were promised as green babes.

The rest is silence.

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